Different Drummer

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Different Drummer

A Fanzine

based on the television series

Quantum Leap

edited by Linda Mooney and Lucy Green

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This zine wouldn't have been possible without the help of Lucy, my co-editor, best friend, manuscript cleaner-upper, confidant, and crying towel.

Thank yous also go to my contributors, Sharon Wells, and especially to Mariann Howarth, who came through in the pinch and saved my literary life. You're a sweetie!

I also want to acknowledge The Quantum Leap Inn on the America Online computer network (10 p.m. EST every Saturday night!) and all my fellow "Leapers" on GEnie.

The *Beauty and the Beast* story entitled "The Road Not Taken" is not in this issue, and I sincerely regret its absence. I hope I have not offended or disappointed anyone, but its inclusion was prohibited by the fact that *I simply ran out of room.* Perhaps in the next zine....

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If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER
(October 14, 1989)

by Linda Mooney

First came the sensation of water, warm and oozing all over, and the feeling of...*bubbles?*...tickling his toes. Then, as the whiteness faded away, he could see that he was reclining in a tub full of suds. A box of Mr. Bubble sat on the tile ledge next to him.

Slowly Sam got to his feet and noticed that the entire wall behind the tub was one large mirror. In it a large, imposing Black man stared back at him with bloodshot eyes. A little long in the tooth with gray liberally sprinkled in his short wiry hair, and sporting a nice middle-age paunch, Sam figured he had to be someone distinguished and important—like a judge or an executive.

Then it hit him, the pounding throb which twisted his head from his eyebrows to the back of his neck. One helluva migraine, and he couldn't figure out what had brought it on. But it was there and it was relentless. Pressing the palms of his hands against his eyes, he tried to squeeze the pain back into less hurtful recesses.

"Oohh, boooy...."

Rubbing his hands over his face, Sam sank back into the froth, inhaling through his teeth as the hot water rushed over him. He closed his eyes and gingerly laid his head back against the cool porcelain rim of the tub, and wondered if the medicine cabinet contained any Tylenol.

"Daddy! You better hurry or you're gonna be late for work!"

"Huh?" Jerking upright in surprise, Sam managed to catch a glimpse of a young and pretty girl before she disappeared behind the bathroom door. Seconds later, there came a light rap, and an older woman boldly walked in.

"I got eggs and bacon waiting downstairs. But if you don't hurry, you won't have time to eat. Didn't Rianne tell you to get moving? I told that girl to give you a holler."

"Well...uh...she did. Just now."

The woman dropped a large blue bathsheet on the closed lid of the toilet, then turned to look at him directly. Modestly, Sam glanced down to make sure the bubbles were strategically placed.

"You don't look too good. Are you feeling okay?"

He raised a hand to his forehead. "Not really. I think I have a migraine headache."

"Oh, poor baby. Here," she turned and delved into the medicine cabinet over the sink, "take a couple of these. Maybe they'll help."

Sam gratefully took the tablets she offered and washed them down with water from the cold tap.

"I'll let you finish your bath, but you're running out of time. Martin will be here in ten or fifteen minutes."

Martin? "Thanks. I'll hurry."

The woman flashed him a smile and sailed out, closing the door behind her. Taking a deep breath, Sam pulled himself from the tub and began drying off. The familiar noise of the accelerator door opening and closing was a welcome sound.

"Nice house."

"I guess so." Sam winced as he straightened to buff his back.

Al bent over to look him in the face. "Hey, you don't look so good. You okay, Sam?"

"Yeah, yeah," he nodded. "Just a bad headache."

"Mmm. Must be sinuses. Either that or allergies."

"Just tell me what you got, Al."

"In a sec. Alright, here's the lowdown. It's 1989, Los Angeles. Your name is Roger Murtaugh. You're a cop. Hmm, another cop. Did you realize you've leaped into more cops than any other profession?"

"Al...." *So much for the executive or judge.*

"Okay, I get the hint. Ziggy says you're married. Your wife's name is Trish; you have two daughters named Rianne and Carrie, and a son named Nick."

"Who's Martin? Is he my partner?"

"Oh, yeah. Martin Riggs. Big guy, looks a little bit like that movie star...you know, the one who played Mad Max. Says here he was pretty much of a loner before you two were teamed up a couple of years ago."

Grunting in acknowledgement, Sam wrapped the sheet about his waist and walked out of the bathroom. Al followed him, pointing down the hallway. "Bedroom's that way. Better hurry, Sam. I think your partner's here to pick you up."

Sure enough, Sam could hear the commotion coming from downstairs as his wife and children greeted his partner. "So why am I here, Al?"

"Don't know yet. I mean, I don't have the details."

"What *do* you have?"

"Honestly, I don't have much." Al turned his back, mumbling something under his breath, making Sam stop dressing to give him his full attention.

"I didn't catch that."

"Catch what?"

"That little comment you just made. Something about Ziggy?"

"Nothing. It was something Gooshie said."

"About Ziggy? What?"

"Well," Al grimaced, "Ziggy's been pulling a few boners here recently."

"Boners?"

"You know. Acting all high and mighty one minute, then pretending her feelings have been hurt the next. And Gooshie commented that maybe...."

"Maybe what?" Geesh, he hated it when he had to pull information from Al with nothing less than surgical forceps.

"That maybe she was suffering from PMS."

"PMS?" Sam laughed aloud, an honest but open chuckle. The effort, however, intensified the headache, and cut his humor short with a soft groan of pain.

"Sorry, Sam."

"Just...tell me what you've got." He reached for his pants.

"All I can tell you is that sometime in the next few days Martin Riggs will be crushed to death."

Sam waited to hear more, but Al stood staring at him in silence. "That's it? That's all I get? 'Crushed to death'?"

"Sorry."

"No, no, don't apologize." He grinned rather lopsidedly. "Maybe if you give Ziggy a couple of Midol she'll settle down enough to give us the rest of what we need to know."

Al snorted. "Don't count on it."

"Hey, Rog! I ain't getting any younger!" a voice called up from below the hall stairwell.

"Crushed to death, huh? Well, it looks like my work's cut out for me. That could be just about anything." Grabbing a sport coat with one hand, Sam lifted his shoulder harness from the bedside table and hurried out of the bedroom to join his partner.

Martin Riggs had to be the second worst driver on the North American continent. The first place in that dubious distinction still belonged to Sam's Uncle Arthur who, at the age of 87, decided it was time he learned how to drive and avoid being a further burden on his family members whenever he needed to go into town. The year was 1959, however, and vehicles were equipped with only one type of transmission—standard. It wasn't long after Uncle Arthur got his license that Sam's dad had to replace the engine in their '54 Chevy pickup.

But all in all, Sam had to hand it to his partner. He ran a close second.

"Hey! This is great! What's gotten into you, Rog? You never willingly let me drive before." Martin continued to prattle on, not waiting for an answer, as Sam gripped the passenger door's armrest and the dashboard with near-palsied hands.

"You know, I think I've got this thing figured out. It's real simple. We don't get involved! How 'bout it? We see a big bust, or some sorry SOB trying to snuff out some poor little old lady for her Social Security check, and we call it in from the nearest pay phone. And voila! We stay out of the investigation, we avoid the paperwork, and it keeps us free for Tuesday. What do you say, Rog?"

Sam's face flashed pasty white. "WATCH OUT FOR THAT TRUCK!"

"Truck? What truck?"

"THE BRAKES!"

The station wagon screamed as it tried to avoid a rear-end collision with the flatbed loaded with concrete sewer pipes. Miraculously, the hood bounced to a stop less than an inch from the truck's back bumper. Unfortunately, Sam banged his head against the passenger door window.

"SON of a...! Stopped in the middle of the highway without brake lights or flashers!" Riggs tore out of his seat to cite the driver, leaving Sam to shake from delayed stress.

"This could be your ticket out," a voice calmly informed him from the back seat.

Already he could feel a nice sized swelling starting to rise above his right eye. Drawing a sleeve over his sweating forehead, Sam managed to reply, "What do you mean?"

"I mean that if you *had* plowed into the back of that truck, you and your partner could've been crushed to death by that load of pipe."

Sam sat up. A smile slowly dawned on his face. "Yeah! That's right! So Ziggy thinks I'm finished here?"

"I...don't know."

"Al!"

"She's still not talking. But Gooshie and I ran some separate figures, and we figure that, based on your past track record, you shouldn't be stuck here more than a couple of days. Who knows? You might've gotten lucky on your first try."

Taking a deep breath, Sam tried a different tactic. "Have you thought about bypassing Ziggy and using the secondary systems to access the Library of Congress? Call up copies of the newspaper and see if there's any story about Riggs dying in a traffic accident."

"Hmm." Al scratched his chin with his thumb. "That's an idea. Be right back." And he was gone in the blink of an eye.

At the same time, Riggs tramped back to the car and started to crawl back under the wheel when Sam cut in front of him. "Why don't I drive the rest of the way?"

"Aww, I figured as much," Riggs groused, but a dimple emerged in one cheek. He hopped into the passenger side and waited for Sam to pull back into traffic. But when he noticed his partner was quietly sitting, staring at the steering wheel, he spoke out with concern. "Hey, pal. Trish said you were a little under the weather. Are you gonna be okay?"

Sam managed a watery smile. "I still have the headache. And this little incident's shaken me up a bit, too. No, I'm driving," he held up a hand to ward off Riggs's suggestion before it was uttered, "Just give me directions on how to get to the station."

Riggs gave a low whistle. "You really are ready for a little vacation, aren't you? Alright. Take the next exit ramp and hang a left under the overpass."

Sam nodded and signaled into traffic.

"You never said whether you liked my plan or not," Riggs insisted.

Plan...plan. "You mean the one about trying to get off work on Tuesday?" Sam hazarded a guess. "What's so special about being bogged down in work on Tuesday?"

Riggs threw up his hands in aggravation. "What's with you, Rog? We've been planning on this little trip ever since the Giants made the playoffs! Remember? You...me...field seats along the third base line?"

"Uhh...yeah. Yeah, now I do." *No, I don't.* Sam bit his lower lip and hoped that if he fudged enough, he might be given enough clues to figure it out.

"Go right at the next light. Your lane's clear. I called my buddy that lives in Oakland. He's gonna be at his timeshare condo in Orlando that weekend, but says we're free to bunk at his place. He's into sailboat racing and couldn't care less about the World Series. I figured that if we left right after work Monday, we could make San Fran by one a.m. tops. So, whaddaya say?" He waggled his eyebrows, waiting for a response.

"No newspaper articles about an accident. Guess that wasn't the 'crushed to death' we were waiting for. Guess you figured that out already, since you haven't leaped. Right?" Al commented from the back seat.

"Right. Well...then, I'd better tell Trish we'll be leaving Monday after work."

"Leaving for where?" Al questioned, already punching information into his hand link.

"Who are..." *The Giants? The San Francisco Giants?* Sam wished he'd played closer attention to Riggs's chattering. "Who are the Giants playing?"

Riggs threw up his hands. "That does it! Now I *know* you're not feeling yourself. Turn here; here's the parking lot. What's really causing your memory loss, old partner of mine? Did you fall in the tub this morning? I can't believe the memory of that twenty spot I won off of you after the last game is already faded and forgotten."

He opened the door, hitting the pavement before Sam had pulled to a stop in the first empty parking slot. Al sighed for the both of them, following his friend into the precinct.

After a couple of hours trying to make heads or tails of the paperwork on his desk—all of which only intensified the busy little gremlins hammering away behind his eyes—Sam and Riggs were called to investigate a probable homicide.

The victim was found lying inside his car which was parked on a hill in one of the slum areas of the city. The man, dressed in an Armani suit which had probably cost more than any LA cop earned in a month, was sitting behind the wheel of his Beemer, his car phone in one hand and a snub-nose revolver in the other. A perfectly round hole right above the victim's ear told how the man had died.

Riggs hemmed and hawed as he perched inside the passenger side of the car and searched for clues. Sam stepped back when he spotted Al watching from the sidewalk. Pretending he was intently examining the pavement, he whispered, "What have you got, Al?"

"Fifty bucks on the Rams to make it to the Super Bowl this year. Oh! You mean on your leap!"

"If you don't mind."

"Nada. Zip. Ziggy's still not talking, and Gooshie and I have no idea what to look for in the archives."

Glancing around, Sam tried to collect his thoughts. "Did you find out anything about next Tuesday?"

"When would that be?"

"October seventeenth."

"What makes you think something could happen then?"

Sam shrugged. "I don't know. Call it a hunch. Riggs is worked up about us sneaking down to San Francisco and calling in sick that day just to catch the next playoff game."

"Well, Sam, the World Series is nothing to sneeze at. Lots of people finagle out of work to see the games in person. Why, I remember the '77 playoffs. I got my fourth wife...or was it my third?...anyway, I got her to call in and say...."

"Al."

"Uhh, right." Al took a step back and looked up. "Gooshie! Check the archives for October seventeenth. Let me know if anything

important happened that day." Turning back to his friend, he said, "This may take a while, Sam. That's a lot of data to weed through."

They waited as the programmer left the console to call up the information they'd requested. In the meantime, the coroner's wagon and two more squad cars pulled up to the scene. Sam watched their goings-on, not really paying attention, when he noticed the tiniest movement in the station wagon. At first he though his eyes were playing tricks on him, considering the ferocity of his headache. But...there!...again!...the vehicle rolled backwards a little. Maybe in his haste the coroner had neglected to place the car in park. Maybe he'd forgotten to set the emergency brake. At any rate, the wagon was definitely beginning to roll back—toward the small knot of police around the Beemer...

...toward Riggs.

"Ohmigod, SAM!"

But Sam had already bolted for the trundling vehicle, which was closer. Somehow he managed to throw open the driver's door and plunge inside. His feet hit the brake and the emergency brake pads simultaneously, barking his knees into the steering wheel and dashboard, and the car groaned to a halt mere feet from the officers.

"Geesh, Sam, that was great! You saved those guys from becoming paté. You'll probably be able to leap now!"

"Think so?" he muttered moments before he was surrounded by grateful police.

The leap never came, and again Sam was left with the feeling that the previous two escapades were nothing compared to what still awaited them.

To make matters worse, Gooshie was having a hard time trying to call up the information they needed, and requested that Al come back in to help.

"You'll be careful, right, Sam?" He waited for his friend to acknowledge him before stepping back into the open doorway and watching it slam down.

Back at the station, Riggs took it upon himself to finish the paperwork—a minor miracle according to the whispered gossip flying through the department—and left his buddy in relative peace and quiet to try and shake off his migraine.

Running his hands through his hair, Sam leaned back in his chair and tried to stretch the kinks out of his shoulders. "I'm ready to call it a day," he mumbled half-aloud. His watch read 6:27 p.m.; his body felt more like 1:00 a.m. And the headache was still playing ragtime in his sinus cavities.

A cute blonde officer stopped by his desk long enough to drop a sheaf of papers into his IN box. "Yeah, tough call," she answered him

unexpectedly. "I heard about your new DB. Riggs is bragging he'll have the case closed within the week. But of course, we know how *that* usually goes."

"Usually goes?"

She flashed him a warm yet sympathetic smile, and Sam rued the fact that the man he was supposed to be had a reputation as a loving husband and family man. It would have been nice to spend a quiet dinner with her detailing the horrors of having someone like Martin Riggs as a partner.

"You know...he dives headfirst without thinking, and you'll probably have to dive in after him to cover his butt."

It's not that the man isn't 'likable', he complained to himself as he waited in the police parking lot for Riggs to show up so they could head home. *He's smart, he's enthusiastic, and he's got a great nose on him for sniffing out clues...but he's becoming a menace to my health and welfare! How in the world does his real partner put up with him? Not counting the two scenes where we both nearly got creamed, of which I'm the one who suffered the most bruises, he found a way to spill scalding coffee on me, open a filing cabinet drawer into my face, and nearly stab me with a ballpoint pen.*

Riggs showed up then, took one look at his partner's face, then walked over to the passenger's side. "How's that stain, Rog? Think Trish can get it out?"

Sam looked down at the brownish spot above his knees. "Yeah, yeah, yeah."

"Neat. Hey, but I'm panned out in the grocery department at my place. Mind if I bum supper at yours?"

"Sam, Mr. Murtaugh back in the waiting room wanted me to warn you that his wife is *the* worst cook in California. Just in case. Riggs would know that."

"Not unless you're looking for a first class stomach ache," Sam replied almost jovially. Shame he couldn't say "yes".

"You're right. This close to the game I shouldn't risk it. How 'bout we pull in to the next supermarket so I can grab some bread and bologna?"

"You got it."

They found a local Ralphs three blocks down. Sam parked the car.

"You go on ahead. I'll be in in a second to look for some acetaminophen if you need me," he said.

"Aceta-what?"

"Tylenol."

"Oh, yeah, I knew that. Think I'll pick up a six-pack, too, while I'm at it." And with that, Riggs headed off toward the store.

As soon the man was beyond earshot, Sam turned around to face Al. "What did you find, Al?"

"Still working on it, Sam. Ziggy found out we'd bypassed some of her controls and bypassed our bypasses...it's a bit complicated. We're gonna hafta hand load some of those old microfilm spools into the machines to find out what you need to know. I just popped back in to say it might be a day or two before I can get back."

"Do what you need to do. Oh, and tell Ziggy that if she doesn't straighten up soon, I'm going to personally pull her plug the first moment I get back!"

Al left after a smart little salute, and Sam reluctantly went into the store.

One of the disadvantages of leaping from one locale to another was that you never had a chance to learn where things were. Cities, shops, even the layout of your own home or apartment was a strange, vast, and unmapped territory. Coping as best he could, Sam wandered down the aisles of the supermarket, trying to read the little display signs hanging from the ceiling, looking for the health and beauty section.

Right across from the paper goods section, a mother with two young children was pricing diapers. In the seat, a little boy no more than eighteen months old was busily chewing on the strap of her purse, while the four- or five-year-old girl hung on the outside of the shopping cart. Sam glanced at them, then turned away to go into the next aisle, when the little girl decided to try her hand at pushing the basket for her mommy. From the corner of his eye, he noticed the cart start to careen toward the end of the section, directly aimed at a towering display of canned fruit drinks. Instinctively, he started after the cart, wondering if he could stop it in time, when somehow Riggs popped around the corner of the display.

Like a flash of intuition, Sam realized that if the cart hit the pyramid of cans, the heavy 24 ounce containers could go crashing down on top of Riggs and the children, possibly crushing them—or at least seriously injuring them.

Not knowing he yelled at his partner to be on the lookout, Sam launched himself between the cart and the display, reaching the basket just as it collided with the cans. Somehow he managed to wedge himself in front of Riggs, while also pushing the basket back out into the center of the aisle. Grasping the little girl with one hand and scooping the infant up under his other arm, he fell backwards out of the line of fire. Cans fell like large aluminum hailstones—a couple clipped him on the arm and shoulder —but the children were safe. Riggs, on the other hand, had landed on his loaf of bread, which now resembled a long oval tortilla.

Howarth '93

"Whew! That was close!" Riggs got to his feet, holding out a hand to his partner to help him up. "Nice job, Rog. Good to see you haven't lost your touch."

Sam managed to stand and survey the damage as the mother hurried over to claim her offspring. Without a word of thanks, she grabbed her cart and took her children and groceries off into another section of the store.

However, Sam didn't fare as well. This time in addition to the bruises and coffee-stained pants, he tallied a rip in the elbow of his jacket where the sleeve had gotten caught on the shopping cart.

"Oh, swell." He shook his head.

"Yeah," Riggs agreed. "When you get home, Trish isn't going to be none too happy when she sees what you've done to your clothes."

"What I'VE done! *You're* the one who spilled the coffee on me!" Sam argued. "Because of *you* I've nearly had my head bashed into the rear of a flatbed trailer, my legs crushed under the dashboard of a coroner's wagon, and my back broken by cans of...pineapple orange juice! And that was AWAY from the office!" Pivoting on his heel, Sam angrily marched out of the store and remained outside in the car until Riggs climbed back into the front seat with his sack of groceries.

"Hey, man, I'm sorry. Here, I thought you could use these." Riggs handed him a large bottle of extra strength Tylenol with his apology. Sam accepted it gratefully and quickly downed two gelcaps, wincing as he tried to swallow them without water.

The rest of the ride to the Murtaugh home was uneventful, for which Sam was eternally grateful. With a few words of goodnight, he watched as Riggs drove away in his own pickup and barely missed sideswiping the city sanitation truck making its way down the block.

"Don't you look a sight," Al commented beside him.

"Not now, Al. It's been a bad day at Black Rock."

"I know. I've been watching you. And, as you probably know by now, that scene at the grocery store wasn't your ticket out."

"No kidding." He threw up his hands in aggravation. "I don't know how much more I can take. I feel like I've got an albatross hanging around my neck, and its name is 'Martin Riggs'!"

Al backpedaled. "Geesh, you *are* in a bad mood."

"Please...is Ziggy back on-line?"

"Sort of."

"What do you mean, 'sort of'?"

"I mean she'll run our reports but she still won't call up any information or give us any probability statistics."

"So we still don't know where Riggs is supposed to be 'crushed to death'. Nor do we have any idea why."

"Oh, but we managed to get one piece of information out of her."

"What was that?"

"We know *when.*"

Sam's face lit up. "That's great! When?"

Al took a deep breath and looked him straight in the eye. "October seventeenth." At his friend's shocked expression, he solemnly added, "It gets better. You're going to be with him when it happens."

"You mean I'll watch him get crushed to death?"

"No. I mean you'll be crushed along with him. You die together, Sam."

Sam swallowed hard. "Did you get that information from the papers?"

"Ziggy told us just before she went back into one of her slumps."

"But what about checking the microfilm?"

Shaking his head, Al said, "It's going to take another day before we can get all the equipment shipped to the complex. For the moment, we're at a standstill." Pointing in the direction Riggs had left, Al wryly added, "Given your present circumstances, I decided to come back to wait."

"Well, tomorrow's Sunday. Hopefully, nothing will happen then."

Al protested. "But I already said that D-Day was Tuesday."

"Yes, I heard you. But that doesn't exclude the possibility of a minor concussion or a couple of broken bones before then."

"Oh. Right."

Fortunately, nothing drastic *did* happen Sunday. After retiring early soon after supper Saturday night—"I haven't tasted meatloaf that bad since I ate in the college dormitory!" he complained to his friend—Sam awoke bright and early Sunday morning free from headaches and sinus problems.

He spent most of the day mowing and edging the front and back yards, and keeping an eye on Riggs. His partner had shown up at his back door with two duffel bags of dirty laundry, but Trish seemed resigned to doing it. The rest of the afternoon the man played a game of Monopoly with Rianne and Carrie, showing them how they could cheat. And later that evening he parked himself in the living room with Sam and Nick to watch a Rams game while Trish and the girls took in a movie at the local theater.

It was while he was resting on the back porch, though, enjoying a cold beer between yards, that Sam grew to realize that many of Riggs's actions were deliberately exaggerated. His attention to the Murtaugh family was genuine and sincere and due much in part to the fact that he'd lost his own wife not too long before. There was no record of any living parents or siblings, which meant that Sam—or Roger—was probably the only true friend the man had. And the Murtaugh family was the family he'd never had, or had always wanted. Either way, Martin Riggs was a very lonely

man. In that new light, Sam learned to forgive the man for all past transgressions—and any that might transpire in the future.

That next Monday, Sam couldn't believe his good fortune. It was as though God/Fate/Whatever had decided that Sam either needed a day's grace before Tuesday, or that he'd paid enough dues last Friday. Whichever it was, there were no near-misses, no near-fatal accidents, and Sam got his own coffee.

Shortly before three that afternoon, the Officer on Watch called them into the Captain's office for a little briefing. Riggs groaned loudly.

"That's it, Rog. We can kiss our trip to Candlestick goodbye."

"Why?" Sam asked.

"Hey, the only reason the Captain calls us in is to assign us to some dead dog case that no one else wants to dirty their hands with. And he'll probably want it done pronto, meaning we'll be stuck running down leads the rest of the week."

But Sam and Riggs were in for a pleasant surprise.

"San Francisco police just called me. They got one of ours in custody, Felix Matula. Remember him?"

"Yeah," Riggs spoke up. "He's the dirtbag who offed that convenience store clerk over in North Hollywood, isn't he?"

"That's the one," the Captain nodded. "They need to extradite him back here for a one-on-one with the sole witness who saw him drive away. Now, normally I don't listen to department gossip, but a little bird whispered in my ear that you two had tickets to the big game on Tuesday. Why don't you knock off now and head up there? Bring Matula back Wednesday."

Somehow, Sam managed a smile. "What about the homicide we're currently investigating? The...the guy in the BMW?"

"I'll hand that over to Barnes and Bishop until you get back."

"Gee, that's unusually generous of you," Riggs started to say but was quickly hushed.

"Hey, I figured if I can get you out of my hair for a couple of days, my stomach might have a chance to settle down. I'm already on my second bottle of Maalox this month and my doctor is yelling about an ulcer. So get out of my office, get out of my precinct, and get out of Los Angeles...at least until Wednesday!"

"Thank you, Captain!" Sam said.

"Oh, and Riggs?"

"Yeah, Cap?"

"Don't lose the prisoner."

"Don't worry," Riggs grinned, shutting the door behind him.

The Captain made a pained face. "He says 'don't worry'. Ohh, my aching stomach...."

The drive up the coast to San Francisco was uneventful. They stopped at a greasy spoon near Pismo Beach for supper before cutting across to IH 101. It was a little after 10:30 p.m. when they coasted into the southern fringes of San Francisco.

All along the way Sam let Riggs do most of the talking while he himself did the driving. He'd pored over an atlas he'd found at the house, memorizing important roads and landmarks for the trip.

For once his partner didn't get on his nerves as badly as he first thought he would. The man spent a long time talking about baseball, which also was a favorite sport of Sam's, until Sam steered him toward basketball. They then argued players and strategies for the better part of two hours. The rest of the way they jumped from subject to subject, ranging all the way from the advantages of boxer shorts to briefs, to whatever happened to rock groups like the Doobie Brothers and CCR.

They passed through the inner city, taking the Cypress, then navigated IH 80 over the Bay Bridge to Oakland. In the far distance, Sam could see the lights of Alcatraz Island. The sight of the infamous ex-prison stirred vague memories in the back of his mind, as though long-forgotten demons threatened to awake, bringing with them indistinct and nebulous terrors from the past. In fact the entire time they drove over the water on the multi-laned extension, the hairs on the back of Sam's neck stood on end. The bridge was well-lit, traffic flowed smoothly in both directions...so why did he feel spooked?

Riggs consulted a scrap of paper he'd fished out of his wallet, and gave Sam directions to the house where they would be staying. Sure enough, the key was where they'd been told it would be, and Riggs's friend had even stocked the fridge.

"This is great!" Riggs beamed, rubbing his hands together. "Whaddaya say we hit the sack early, get up late and have a *big* breakfast, and then do a little sightseeing before we hafta head for the Park? Hmm? Do a little rubbernecking? Let's make the most of our day off!"

Sam bowed his head, but managed a smile. Something was wrong. Something was *very* wrong. Hopefully Al would reappear soon to clear up the puzzle. "Yeah, that sounds good. Why don't you go ahead and get into the shower first? I'd like to grab a beer from the fridge and unwind a little out on the back porch...uhh, patio."

"Sure thing. That sound like a good idea. I'll join you in two shakes."

Almost in a daze, Sam wandered into the kitchen and got a can of beer from the refrigerator. He continued on through the back door as he opened the drink, found the nearest webbed-seated chair, and collapsed into it. Slumped down, he never heard the accelerator door open and close.

"I've always liked the fall. The leaves turn all those pretty colors and the air gets cooler. When I was a POW I looked forward to the changing of the seasons. I studied each and every minute difference that came over the land. I watched the insects, the plants. I even memorized the constellations. I had lots of time on my hands; it gave me something to do."

"I was hoping you'd show up. My gut is telling me something is going to happen, something big. The air smells wrong, being here *feels* wrong!" He looked up at his friend, and in the light filtering from the kitchen he could see the drawn, serious look in those dark eyes."What is it, Al? You found out something, didn't you?"

"The ballgame will never be played tomorrow, Sam," he said in a soft voice. "It was canceled."

"Canceled? How do you cancel a game of the World Series?"

"When the stadium cracks on its foundation because of a major earthquake."

"What?" At first Sam thought he hadn't heard correctly. He sat up, still in shock. "An earthquake? Here? Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow afternoon. Ziggy broke her silence and gave us the information we needed just a few minutes ago."

"And the 'crushed to death' message? Is Riggs going to get crushed by a falling beam or something?"

Al shook his head. "You could say that. When you go back over the Bay Bridge, you'll take the Cypress exchange...and that means you'll be on the top bunk, right?"

"Uhh, yeah. Bottom lanes come into Oakland, top lanes head into San Francisco. So?"

"So...the interstate is going to completely collapse, crushing hundreds of people. One of the vehicles recovered was a station wagon matching the description and license plate number belonging to a Roger Murtaugh of Los Angeles. There were two bodies inside, but they were never positively identified because they were burned beyond recognition. Two bodies, Sam. You were with him when the quake hit."

Sam gasped, trying to draw air into his lungs. An *earthquake?* Somewhere, somehow, he knew he'd survived a hurricane or a typhoon or something like that, but an earthquake—in his opinion—was far more destructive and dangerous. You could predict to some degree of accuracy where a hurricane would hit and you could leave that area. But in 1989 science still couldn't foretell earthquakes and give people time to vacate the vicinity before they struck. People died in hurricanes because of ignorance. People died in earthquakes because of bad luck.

"The wrong place at the wrong time."

"What?" Al asked.

"Look...I'm here to change history. I'm here to make sure Riggs...and I...don't die on the bridge. Well, then, it's simple! We won't be on the bridge when the quake hits!"

"Sam."

"I'll tell Riggs we can't head for the stadium until later. And by that time the quake will have struck and we'll be safe. Where will the epicenter be? Will we be okay here in Oakland?"

Al punched the question into his commlink and read back the answer. "You'll have some damage, but the house was built to sustain the shock. You'll be okay if you stay here."

"Great."

"Uhh, but Sam, how are you going to convince your buddy not to leave without you?"

Sam grinned. "It's my car. I have the keys. He'd have to call a taxi if he wants to go."

"Good luck, then, on convincing him," Al commented drily. "This I gotta hear."

"What's this about a taxi?" Riggs asked, stepping onto the patio with a beer in one hand and a bag of potato chips in the other.

"Uhh...." Sam cleared his throat and tried to sound convincing. "I was listening to the late news and they think an earthquake is going to hit this area tomorrow."

Riggs stared at him incredulously before breaking into laughter. "Oh, you're a riot, Rog! You really are! An earthquake? What is this, some kind of joke?"

"I mean it, Riggs. An earthquake is going to hit the San Francisco and Oakland area tomorrow afternoon. The World Series game will be postponed. And we're going to be crushed alive on the Cypress if we get on it!"

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute!" Riggs held up his hands in a vain attempt to ward off his partner's stream of prophecies. "You heard all that on the *news?* What's gotten into you, Rog? You sure that's just beer you're drinking?"

Agitated, Sam got to his feet and began pacing. "Okay, so I didn't get all that from the news. But it IS going to hit! I can feel it! But if we stay here we'll be safe. You have to believe me, Riggs!" He grabbed the man by the shoulders and stared him straight in the eye. "If we go over to San Francisco tomorrow, we're both going to die!"

"On the Cypress."

"On the Cypress," Sam echoed.

The two men stared at each other—one trying to make the other believe by sheer force of will, and the other wondering if his best friend had

finally snapped under the pressure of the work. Finally Riggs stepped away and shook his head.

"You're tired, Rog, and so am I. Why don't we get a good night's rest and talk about this again tomorrow?" Walking to the door, he went into the house without a backward glance.

"Nice try, Sam. Real convincing."

"I have to try again tomorrow morning. I must make him believe."

"And what if he won't believe you?"

"Then...I guess I'll have to find some way to keep him off the bridge."

"Good luck. And good night, Sam."

"Good night, Al." He watched the hologram blink out, but stayed outside a while longer, trying to think of possible scenarios. After a while, unable to keep his eyes open, Sam stumbled back into the house, found his room, and fell onto the bed fully clothed. He was asleep in seconds.

He awoke several hours later to the smells of frying bacon and burnt toast. Groaning, Sam padded to the bathroom and took a quick shower. That done and feeling somewhat better, he braved the kitchen.

"Yo! Good morning!" Riggs cheerfully barked over his shoulder. "My eggs may be a little runny and the toast on the dark side, but it's filling. You like orange juice?"

"Got any coffee?"

"Coming up!"

Sam watched as the man prattled about, rattling dishes and splattering grease. All traces of disbelief or anger were gone—with any luck forgotten, or at the least, buried. He soon found out that neither was the case.

"I'd been thinking about last night," Riggs brought up the subject first, much to Sam's relief. "It's been a rough couple of weeks at work. Add that to your migraines and the drive up here, I figured you were overextended. Maybe the news did say something about an earthquake. I listened this morning to *Good Morning, America* but they didn't say a word about it."

Sam quickly glanced around the room, searching for a clock. "What time is it, anyway?"

"Nearly ten."

"How long have you been up?"

Riggs shrugged. "A few hours. I caught the Stooges on the tube around seven. After that, I walked down to the Pick 'N Pak a couple of blocks over and got a paper and a quart of milk. Nothing in the paper either about the quake. What channel did you say you heard it on?"

"I...don't remember. I was flipping channels. But you *do* believe me, don't you?"

Riggs's face darkened slightly. "Are we going to go through that again?"

Taking a deep breath, Sam sat back in his chair. "Look at me, Riggs. Look at me hard. In all the time we've been together have I ever steered you wrong?"

Riggs made a moue. Recognizing the doubt, Sam persisted. "Will you at least do me this small favor?"

His partner sighed. "What?"

"Let's...wait a while before we head over to the game. We've got our tickets. Our seats will still be waiting for us *if* the quake doesn't hit."

"How long do we have to wait? You know, you're really pushing the limits with this one, Rog."

How long? "How long will it take us to get to Candlestick?"

"Give or take, thirty minutes with the traffic."

"Okay. What say we wait until forty-five minutes before game time? Humor me. Will you at least agree to that much?"

Riggs threw his hands up into the air in mock surrender. "Alright, alright, already! If it'll get you off my back, I'm willing to wait until forty-five minutes before game time. But not a minute more."

"Deal!" Sam smiled, extending his hand to shake on it. The two men then shared a less-than-palatable breakfast and discussed safer topics.

The clock crawled forward, and with each slowly passing hour Riggs's anticipation increased as Sam's worrying intensified. Cooped up in the house, they alternated between watching the television and casting dubious looks at each other. At no time did any of the newscasts predict or even report about a tremor or earthquake, creating further tension between the two men. Finally, unable to bear the ridiculousness of the situation, Riggs threw the magazine he'd been leafing through against the wall and jumped to his feet.

"That's it! I give up! I'm not going to stand around here any longer like an idiot for some earthquake you *say* you heard about, but the media has no inkling of!"

"Riggs, you agreed to wait," Sam reminded him.

"Wait schmait. We came up here for a little R and R and I'll be damned it I'm gonna spend it sitting on my butt reading *People* magazine!" The man stomped out of the room and disappeared into his bedroom. A few minutes later he re-emerged with a set of keys in his hands, heading for the front door. Sam blanched.

"Where are you going?"

Riggs paused in the doorway. "I've got two tickets to the game. This is my first time, and maybe my last time, to get to attend the World Series. If you want to come, you're more than welcome. But if you'd

rather wait here for a quake which isn't going to happen, you're welcome to that, too."

"Sam, you have to stop him! That quake's gonna hit any minute now!"

Beckett shifted his attention from Al's form hovering half in-half out of the front door to the man standing there. *Stall, stall, stall!* "How do you plan to get there? We came in my car."

"I called a taxi, if you care to know. I'll wait for him outside."

"Sam!"

"Wait! It's going to hit! Any time now!"

Riggs looked pained. "Rog...."

Suddenly, Sam knew the time for words had passed. Martin Riggs was walking out of that door, threat or no threat, and no amount of pleading would stop him. A man of few actions, Sam unexpectedly launched himself at the man, catching him off-guard. Grabbing him around the legs, he neatly tackled the man to the ground. A quick clip to the jaw, and Riggs was unconscious before he knew what had hit him.

"Oww, geesh!" Sam shook his hand, rubbing the abused knuckles. Looking up at Al, he remarked, "Okay, I've done my part. Now what do you suggest?"

"Got any rope? Tie him up. By the time he comes to, hopefully the quake will have already hit."

But searching the kitchen and the one-car garage produced no rope. Not even clothesline or wire. Sam stood, hands on hips, and scanned the room, hoping to spot something he could use when Al's voice yelled from one of the bedrooms.

"In here, Sam! I think I found something."

He found his friend standing in the unoccupied bedroom used by Riggs's acquaintance. "Well?"

Al pointed to the bureau next to the bed. "Check the drawers."

"What could I find in there that would help?"

"Pantyhose, Sam. Riggs's friend is a bachelor, and every bachelor has a few forgotten undergarments hidden somewhere in his bedroom." At Sam's unmistakable look, Al amended, "Well, *most* bachelors do."

True to his prediction, Sam found two pairs of pantyhose in the bottom drawer, which worked very well as makeshift handcuffs. After he'd securely tied the unconscious man and laid him in the middle of the kitchen floor, he sat down across from him with his back against the wall and prepared to wait.

5:02.

He didn't have to wait long.

It started at first as a low rumbling sound, soon followed by a gentle rocking of the floor. A second later the ground beneath them jumped

and began to vibrate violently. Pictures and objects were lifted off the walls with unseen hands and thrown down. Windows broke, dishes fell out of cabinets, and mirrors shattered, creating a vast symphony like a hundred windchimes. Heavy furniture jitterbugged across carpet and linoleum alike, and the house strained against the natural disaster.

Then, as suddenly as it had hit, it was over. Mere seconds later, the initial quake was spent. But there would be aftershocks—the danger wasn't over yet.

But Riggs and I are alive! Sam rejoiced. *I've done it!* Happy, he crawled over to check on his partner, whose eyelids were beginning to jerk.

"That's it, Sam! You saved him from dying, and now you're ready to leap."

Looking up at Al, Sam asked half in jest, "You sure? I mean, this is it? Positively?"

"Ziggy gives it a ninety-seven percent. You're outta here."

"What happens now? Will Riggs and Murtaugh remain partners, or did I really mess things up when I slugged him?"

Al checked his commlink. "Don't worry. They patch things up nicely, and even get back to Los Angeles with their prisoner without too much hassle. But, just to be on the safe side, I put a little bug in Mr. Murtaugh's ear."

"You what?"

"Well...I told him what you'd done and what he could probably expect when Riggs woke up."

"And how did he respond to that?" Sam wanted to know.

"He hung his head and said 'I'm getting too old for this shit'."

Sam started to laugh, but it was preceded by a flash of white and the familiar feeling of non-being.

Into the Valley of Death
(June 1, 1990)

by Linda Mooney

He felt as though he'd literally been dumped into the middle of one of the greatest disasters on the face of the earth. People were screaming, running and bumping into one another in total panic in their attempt to reach the other side of the enclosed room. Someone rammed an elbow into his face, knocking him flat on his butt and leaving him stunned. Men and women stood trembling, cowering in absolute fear against the opposite wall, and looking back in his direction.

No...Sam shook his head to try and clear it...they were looking *past* him! As though he stood between them and something so terrifying that they had to flee for their lives.

A siren was whooping outside the room, but its shrill scream of warning reverberated within the metal walls of the room. And faintly he could feel a thrumming of something big and powerful beneath his feet. A power plant, or an engine of incredible size.

Still disoriented from the Leap, Sam managed to swivel around to see what was causing the chaos.

It was a box. Gray, about the size of a shoe box. With two little lights, one red and one green, on top. And the red one was pulsing at a rapid rate.

Mesmerized, Sam slowly walked over to get a better look at the box. There was an LED window on the top, and in the window, numbers. The numbers were clicking off with every beat of the red light. They were clicking off...backwards.

137...136...135...134....

Just like...*a bomb!*

"Oooohhhh, boy!" Sam pivoted awkwardly, the soles of his jogging shoes squeaking on the linoleum floor, and he hightailed it to join the others on the far side of the room.

At that same moment, a bright corridor opened up in the middle of the room, and Al stepped in. "Hey, Sam, what's going on?"

"A bu...bu...*bomb!*" Sam swallowed hard, still shivering from the suddenness of the danger.

Al jumped as though he'd been bit. "A bomb?" he echoed.

Pointing toward the box, Sam nodded. "What in the world am I doing here?" he cried aloud.

"Stuck like the rest of us!" someone shouted.

A woman added, "Can't you do something?"

"Me?"

"Yeah, you!" a man called back. "Aren't you the big hotshot agency wonder boy?"

Sam turned back to Al in time to see his friend's eyes practically bug out of his head as he read Ziggy's information. "He's right, Sam. You're supposed to save these people from getting blown to smithereens."

120...119...118....

"Me? I don't know anything about defusing bombs!" He coughed, suddenly aware of the stuffiness in the room. Glancing around, he finally took a good look at his surroundings.

The walls were dull metal and solid, except for the single door a few feet beyond the bomb. There were no windows or any other entrance. The room held only a few tables, some overturned chairs, and two soft drink machines banked a snack machine against a wall near him. A coffee urn sat on a low cabinet directly beside them.

"A snack room. I'm in a break room. Al?"

Reading his commlink, his friend said, "You're in a government installation in Utah. You're about three hundred feet...*below* ground level!" Glancing back at the relentlessly ticking bomb, Al nervously hopped from one foot to the other. "Sam! You gotta do something quick!"

96...95...94....

"How did that bomb get in here?" Sam wondered aloud.

"What does it matter now?" a man behind him responded. *"Do* something!"

Taking a deep breath, Sam advanced on the explosive and stared at it. Except for the lights and the clock, the box was seamless. "I can't defuse it, Al," he spoke tersely but more quietly. "I don't have any knowledge about this kind of stuff."

Oddly, he felt calmer and more in control of himself. He watched as the time steadily drained from the present—**88...87...86....**—but there was no fear.

He looked around the room again, searching for something to help them out of their dilemma. Obviously God or Time or Whatever wouldn't have leapt him into this situation unless He/She/It felt he could accomplish what he needed.

"Wait a minute. You said Ziggy said I had to save these people, right? Not to stop the bomb, but to get everyone out of the room before it exploded. Was that it?"

"Uhh...." Al rechecked his readout. "Yeah. Right."

"Well, then, that means I'm not supposed to mess with the bomb." Turning suddenly, Sam strode over to the only exit and tried to jiggle the latch. "Locked solid." Kneeling down in front of the door, he peered closer. "What kind of lock is this? What's it made of?"

"It's a Carbarlym lock," someone yelled from the rear of the room.

"Carbarlym...." Sam stared at the narrow hole to the right of the door handle, a tiny, round hole no larger than a pen. "Carbarlym," he repeated. "Didn't I have Carbarlym locks installed at Project Quantum Leap?"

71...70...69....

Al jabbed at the commlink's keys. "Yes, you did. Eight of them. They're for low level security."

"Yes, but when the outer security is breached, they shut down until told to unlock by the main computer. That's why the siren went off."

"Isn't there a key or something to unlock it? Can't the main computer be bypassed or something?" Al asked.

Sam shook his head. "It doesn't take a 'key' in the sense you mean. Carbarlym locks are based on a chemical sealant. In an emergency, squirting Ansophetomethamidrium into this hole will neutralize the chemical component which makes up the 'brain' of the lock, and the door will open." His face suddenly brightened. "And I remember...a small bottle of it could always be found in a glass case right next to the door! Al! Where's the bottle?" He turned around in time to see his friend poke his head through the wall, then draw it back dejectedly.

"You're right, Sam. There *is* a little bottle in a glass case, but it's on the *outside,* on the other side of this wall."

61...60...59....

Sam froze as an idea swept over him. Minute information which somehow had been missed by the leaping effect which swiss-cheesed his mind, seeped through the holes.

"Al? Al, listen! Ansophetomethamidrium is derived from several lesser chemicals like Florobarnite and ACBA particles, but one of its main compounds is aspartame!"

"Ass who?"

"Aspartame! It's a long shot, but it's all we have." He rotated around on his heels and shouted toward the huddled crowd. "Over by the coffee machine! Is there some artificial sweetener over there?"

A man detached himself from the mob and hurried over to the coffee urn. "Yeah, here's some!"

"No, no! Not the pink stuff! The *blue* stuff!"

Several little packets sailed through the air and Sam deftly caught them. Quickly, he ripped a few open and poured the white powder into the palm of his hand. "A straw. I need one of those stirring straws."

The man again obliged, giving the bomb a wide berth to bring one to him.

48...47...46....

Carefully, Sam scooped the sweetener into one end of the straw, shoved it deep into the hole, and blew.

"I hope this works, Sam."

"We'll know in a moment." He scooped up more of the powder and blew it into the lock, then paused to stare at the hole.

"Sam...."

"Shh! Listen!"

"To what?" the man behind him whispered.

"To that!" Sam whispered back triumphantly. Sure enough, a hissing sound, barely audible above the din of the alarm, came from the hole, followed by a thin trail of brownish smoke. Grabbing the handle, Sam bore down on it with all his weight, and something snapped inside the frame. Immediately, the steel door swung inward. When the people pressed against the far wall saw their chance at freedom, they ran for it, nearly trampling Sam in the process.

"Go, Sam, go! Get the hell outta here!"

25...24...23....

His foot slipped out from under him, causing him to bang his knee painfully on the floor, but he managed to get to his feet and hobble out of the room and down the corridor to where everyone was crowding into an elevator. As the thick doors shut just millimeters from his face, Sam finally got a chance to catch a glimpse of his features in their polished surface—blond hair, rugged face, nice leather jacket.

Mentally, he kept time with the bomb, counting away the last precious seconds. As the elevator doors opened on the upper level, he, along with everyone else, ran out of the small surface station and into the sweltering sunlight. And less than a heartbeat later, the ground beneath them shivered like a minor earthquake, and a cloud of smoke and debris belched out of the elevator shaft.

"You did it, Sam! You saved them!"

Bent over, nursing his bruised knee, Sam squinted up at his friend. "But what about the rest of the people? Surely that couldn't've been everyone."

Al studied his information. "Oh, the rest of the people got out ahead of you. You were the only ones left in any danger. I gotta hand it to you. That ass-whatever stuff was brilliant. Uh-oh."

"Uh-oh? What?"

"No, no. Not a bad uh-oh. Ziggy says you're ready to leap."

"Leap? Now?"

"See you later, big guy."

"Wait! Wait a minute! That's it? That's all I had to do?" He managed to rise to his feet.

Al nodded, clamping his teeth back around his cigar. "Yep. Short and sweet."

"For crying out loud, Al! Couldn't I at least find out who I am...or was?" Already he could feel himself growing lightheaded, signaling his impending Leap.

Obliging, Al punched his commlink once more, but his shape was rapidly fading, along with the rest of the world. "Let's see...just a sec ...here it is! You were some guy by the name of Angus...."

But the rest was lost in Sam's lifetime.

THE HIGHWAYMAN CAME RIDING, RIDING
(November 6, 1970)

by Linda Mooney

Every time I leap, I end up in a new situation. You could say I end up at a new beginning. And more often than not, those beginnings can be pretty violent. Which is why, whenever I feel myself beginning to "go", my stomach gets all twisted and knotted up—because I don't know what to expect. Which is also why I view each leap with equal amounts of excitement and dread. Excitement because I'm leaving a job well-done—and dread because I could just fall into the last leap of my life.

It was pouring down rain. Not the kind you look forward to to keep the lawn green, or even the kind which ticks you off because you'd planned to spend the day with the guys out on the course. No, this was what in this part of the country folks affectionately referred to as a Real Frog Strangler.

And to make matters worse, the night was black as pitch.

As the tingling in his hands and feet died away, Sam mentally braced himself, unconsciously balancing on the balls of his feet in case he either needed to make a fast getaway, or to block somebody's roundhouse punch. There was neither. In fact, there wasn't anyone around at all—not for miles. He found himself standing on a two lane tarmac road in what looked like somewhere in rural America. And rain was spraying his face with the force of a Pollenex shower head. Automatically his hands went up to shield his eyes, and brushed across the lapels of the long, dark overcoat he wore. Water dripped down the back of his neck, sending irritating little currents of cold down his spine.

Sighing, Sam buried his chin further into the neck of his coat, crossed his arms about his chest for what little warmth he could, and kept walking. Obviously the road led somewhere, and hopefully along the way he could find a place where he could dry out and perhaps get a cup of coffee to take away the chill.

The rain continued, never letting up, never changing in intensity. A car passed by, going in the opposite direction. In the dark and wet it was hard to tell the make and model of the vehicle, much less the plates, which would have given him some indication as to where and when he was, but he could swear it was a Mustang.

"Al, where the hell are you?"

"Right behind you, Sam, about two steps back."

Sam whirled around, but was unable to make out Al's form. "I can't see you."

"Hold on a minute. Lemme see if I can just boost the image a bit. Gooshie! Hit the rheostat knob, would you?" There were a few squeaks and a gurgle from the handlink, and slowly Al came into focus within a bright halo of light. "That better?"

"Yeah. Can you keep it up until I can find a place to dry out?"

"There's a roadside diner about half a mile in that direction," Al gestured in front of him. "Want me to keep you company until you get there?"

"Please. I'm cold and I'm wet and I'm hungry. By the way, do you know who I am yet? Or where I am?"

"Not yet. Ziggy isn't finished, but she's working on it." Al glanced up at the curtain of water falling from the sky. "Geesh, a real gully washer. It's times like this I'm glad I'm just a hologram."

Sam sighed, feeling the squish of water against his feet. *I hate having water in my boots.* "I'll be glad when we finally get there. There's this pain in my side. Something keeps jabbing me in the ribs."

"Can you tell what it is?"

"I can't even see my hand in front of my face! How do you expect me to see what's under my coat?"

Al shrugged and poked his cigar back into his mouth. Sam noticed Al was wearing that apple green tie of his that he detested because it looked like Warhol's version of a Rorschach test. But he held his tongue and kept plodding on, hoping to reach the diner before he floated away.

It was a few minutes later when Sam could make out the faint neon glow of the diner's sign. By now there wasn't a dry place on him, and he was beginning to doubt if he would ever feel warm again. Two cars were parked in the lot by the front door, a battered pickup and a station wagon with a plastic sheet taped to the back window. This time, Sam could read the plates. *Kentucky.*

A set of little brass bells strung across the door jingled as he stepped inside and stood dripping on the mat. An old man sat hunched on a barstool at the counter, and another younger man dressed in a polyester suit was gorging himself on a banana split in a nearby booth. Wiping his hand over his face, he turned when a woman dressed in a waitress' uniform came through the kitchen doors and spotted him.

"Well, goodness, aren't you a mess!" she beamed good-naturedly. "Bet you could use some hot coffee. I just put a fresh pot on. Why don't you go wring yourself out, and by that time I'll have you a cup waiting." She nodded her head toward the far end of the diner where Sam could see the restroom signs.

"Thanks, I think I will," he muttered, managing a grin in response. He sloshed his way to the back, gratefully collapsing against a tiled wall just inside the door.

"If you don't mind my saying so, you look like a drowned rat," Al muttered.

Sam looked up, but in the fluorescent light Al's enhanced glow was blinding. "Tone it down a bit, would you?"

"Oh. Sorry."

The beacon diminished, allowing Sam to view himself in the small medicine cabinet mirror for the first time. Whoever he was, the man believed in wearing his hair long and pulled back into a ponytail. The features were dark but not imposing, the eyes tired but alert and framed by thick lashes and eyebrows. Several days' growth stubbled his cheeks and chin, but the grunginess only seemed to increase the man's appearance rather than detract from it. No wonder the waitress settled on him in spite of the fact he squished like a sponge.

He bent over the sink to wash his hands when whatever it was inside his coat prodded him again.

"What's doing it?" he half-muttered aloud.

"Doing what?"

"Sticking me!" There was nothing under the coat or in his clothing, but there was something poking out from the inner lining of the garment. A diagonal split ripped open from its velcro seal, and Sam spotted a handle. Slowly, carefully, he pulled the long sword from its hidden sheath, and together he and Al took a deep breath.

"Oh, boy...."

"It's a...it's a..." For a moment Sam was too stunned to spit out the word.

"It's a Samurai sword, like a Ninja would use," Al supplied.

"I know that! But what's this guy doing with one?"

"Why don't you look in his wallet and find out who he is, first. That might give us a clue."

Sam stared at his friend. "You mean you don't know who I am? I mean, Ziggy doesn't know?"

Al hemmed and hawed. "Well, Ziggy's having a problem with your identity because she believes you're using...I mean the guy is using a fake ID."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" Sam wanted to know.

"What did you want me to do?" Al barked back. "Ask you to pull out your driver's license in the middle of the monsoon season?"

"Hey, sweetie! Everything okay in there?" The waitress tapped on the outside of the door, making Sam start.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm doing fine. Be out in a minute."

"I put a cup of coffee on the table at the first booth when you come out. You take cream?"

"Please."

The waitress left, but not before Al suspended his head through the thin plywood wall to ogle.

Suddenly Sam was very tired. He gave his friend a rueful grin and apologized, "I'm sorry, Al. I'm cold and wet, and I'd love to get my hands on the biggest, thickest, juiciest hamburger I can sink my teeth into." He shoved a hand into both pants pockets but was able to produce only a handful of change. "And I have sixty-three, no, sixty-four cents to my name...whatever that is." There was a wallet in another pocket inside the coat. It contained a driver's license with his picture on it and a Social Security card, and nothing else—not even a dollar bill.

"What year is this, Al?"

Al started punching information into his commlink. "You don't want to know," he cryptically replied, and Sam hunched dejectedly over the sink.

"Oh, no, don't tell me...the '70s?"

"Alright, I won't tell you."

"Tell me, Al."

"November 6, 1970. I wish you'd get over this phobia of yours, Sam. Personally, I liked the '70s." His commlink beeped for his attention. Al shoved his cigar into his mouth, punched a couple more buttons, then shook his head. "Just like we figured. The license and Social Security card are bogus."

"Are you sure?" Sam tried to look over Al's shoulder to verify the information, then realized at the last second he couldn't.

"According to your license, you were born in 1940, but you died in 1943. The government has no record of ever issuing the number currently on your Social Security card. And Ziggy still has no idea who you really are."

"The guy in the Waiting Room, think he would tell us?"

"Sam, either the guy's working for the government undercover, which I seriously doubt, or he's under the Federal Witness Protection program, which also seems like a longshot. Or...."

"Or?"

"Or he's someone who doesn't want to be identified, much less found."

Sam's eyes grew wide. "A criminal?"

Al got a pleased expression on his face. "That ain't no toothpick in your hand, Sam," he commented before plugging his mouth again with his stogie.

Reminded of the sword, Sam turned the object in his hands, examining the craftsmanship. It was long and slim and kept in excellent condition. The blade was finely honed, fluted, and very deadly, and there was no guard between the hilt and the blade. The hilt seemed to be carved from a single piece of ivory.

"This thing has to be at least 400 years old," Sam breathed. "And priceless. Wonder why he's carrying it?"

"Maybe he's smuggling it." "Or maybe he was hired by someone to knock someone off. You know, like maybe the Mafia has him under contract."

"Al...."

"Anything's possible, Sam."

Sighing, Sam leaned over the sink and felt the tightening in his stomach shrink another inch. He knew he needed to eat something soon or pass out. Lifting his hand to his face, he suddenly noticed the smear of mud on the backs of his cuffs—and it gave him an idea.

"Hey, Al...does your handlink have that little photocell eye I instructed Gooshie to whip up a while back?"

"The man can't recall if his shorts say Fruit of the Loom or Hanes, but he can remember intricate wiring instructions he gave a month ago," Al wryly commented to no one in particular. "To answer your question, yes. Gooshie had that little camera gizmo installed a couple of weeks ago. We haven't had much of a chance to test it yet."

"Then there's no time like the present." Rubbing the fingers of one hand in the sticky mud, Sam carefully pressed their imprint onto the mirror. He stepped back, satisfied with the result. "Okay. Take a picture of it."

Al obeyed, running the edge of the commlink over the smears, then punched a button. "Now what?"

"Now have Gooshie run the prints. See if they match up anywhere. Oh, and you might want to have him check with Interpol and Scotland Yard, and all divisions of the military. He has to be listed somewhere."

"Got it." Al stepped back into the doorway which suddenly appeared behind him. "You gonna be alright?"

Sam nodded. "I can pay for the coffee. Maybe that waitress will let me work a couple of hours for a bite to eat."

"Well, you take care," Al mother-henned, and the door closed with a hiss.

Sam wiped his prints from the mirror, then used the rough brown paper towels to dry himself off as much as possible. After hiding the sword back inside the coat, he emerged from the bathroom to find the waitress serving a piece of pie to the old man at the counter. The polyester salesman was gone.

The coffee was where she said she'd left it. And although it was lukewarm, it felt good going down. With any luck there would be free refills.

"How 'bout another?" a voice spoke over his shoulder.

Sam started, not aware that he had phased out for a moment.

The waitress frowned with concern. "Sorry, honey. Didn't mean to scare you. Are you feeling alright?"

Forcing one of his better smiles, Sam glanced up and noticed the name tag over her left breast pocket. "I'm just tired, Marie. Thanks."

"Well, you look like you could use a good meal and a good night's sleep."

"No argument there. Unfortunately, I'm...a bit short of cash. I can pay you for the coffee, but I was hoping I could work in the back for a sandwich...if the owner wouldn't mind."

"Honey, the owner ain't here. I haven't had enough customers in here today to eat what I've defrosted, and I doubt with this rain anyone else is gonna come in. And Marvin sure as hell wouldn't want to throw away good food. Can I interest you in a hamburger?"

"Please. Yes."

"I can throw a couple pieces of bacon on it, and maybe a slab of cheese."

"Sounds good." He could hear his stomach rumbling, and apparently so could Marie. She gave him a satisfied smile and freshened his cup before heading for the kitchen.

With the waitress-cum-cook banging away in the back, the front of the diner grew quiet. Rain thrummed on the metal roof—a monotonous sound which threatened to lull him to sleep. The only other sound was the occasional clink from the old man as he cleaned the last bit of pie from his plate.

He hoped Al would be able to find out the identity of the man he'd leaped into.

"So...." The old man cleared his throat, following it with a loud sip of coffee from his saucer. "So you're looking for some work to earn a few dollars?"

Sam looked around, then realized it was he the man was addressing. "Well, uhh, yes, I am. I'm rather...umm...new in town."

"Figured. Running from the law?"

"Uhh, no. No, sir. Hitchhiking, actually." He took a swallow of coffee, hoping to stay the chill which was creeping up his back.

The old man slowly got up from his seat at the counter and ambled over to Sam's booth. He stuck out a hand. "Name's Ketchman. Yours?"

"David McDuncan," Sam replied, remembering the name on the driver's license.

"Where you from?"

"Illinois."

"Where you headed?"

"...uhh, Florida?" Not prepared for the interrogation, Sam tried to hide his nervousness in his cup of coffee. Ketchman eyed him, getting his fill, before taking a seat in the booth across from him.

"Ever work on a farm?"

At the mention of a farm, Sam perked up. "Sure. Grew up on one, in fact. My dad used to grow corn, raise a few head of cattle, that sort of thing."

"Know how to run a tractor?"

Sam grinned widely. "Before I learned how to drive a car."

Ketchman nodded and finally allowed himself a small smile. "Hope so. Could really use the help. I just got back from Bishopsville. Lottie, my wife, she had a stroke a couple of days ago. Been with her at the hospital until today. But when you own a farm, you gotta stay on top of. The cows need to be milked every day, the livestock fed, eggs gathered up.... I couldn't stay any longer. I can't pay you much, but I can throw in a bed and meals into the bargain."

Sam paused for only a second. "Sounds like a bargain I can't pass up. You got yourself a farmhand, Mr. Ketchman," he promised, holding out his hand. "For a few days, at least." This time he noticed that the hand that grasped his was brown, calloused, and welcome.

Ketchman sighed. "Then you'd better call me Skeeter."

"Skeeter?"

"Mother named me Aloysius. Father never cottoned to it. I'll wait until you've eaten. Give me a chance to finish my coffee. Then we'll be off."

Sam nodded as a hamburger the size of a small army tank was plunked in front of him, along with a matching mountain of French fries. It didn't take him long to inhale it.

The old pickup bounced and ground along the blacktop, windshield wipers erratically swiping at the rain. The Chevy was old—starter button on the floor and three speeds on the column—but it growled confidently as Ketchman eased off the main highway and onto a gravel road. Five miles further, they exited onto a dirt driveway which led to a small wood-frame farmhouse. Behind the house sat a small garage, and next to that what looked like chicken coops. In the dark and rain, it was difficult for Sam to make out any more details. Ketchman pulled around the back, into the open garage where a shiny John Deere took up half the space. The truck fitted snugly in the remaining slot.

They raced inside the back porch and into the kitchen where Sam removed his coat and hung it up to dry on a peg near the door. He was careful to make sure the sword was securely hidden in the voluminous folds before following the old man into the back bedroom.

"This is yours. Make yourself at home. Ain't much, but you'll sleep good. Rain's coming in from the north. Crack that window over there and you won't get wet." Giving his new hand one last look-over for the night, Ketchman sighed. "I normally don't pick up strangers and bring them home, but I'm in a pickle...and after watching you a while, I felt I could trust you. *Can* I trust you?"

Despite his weariness, Sam managed his best smile. "I trust *you.* And I normally don't accept offers from strangers, either."

The old farmer chuckled, turned, and pulled the door shut behind him. "'Night, Mr. McDuncan."

"David...call me David."

"Bright and early, David. Get your rest."

"But...the rain?"

"Should slacken soon and stop before dawn. Be wet in the morning, but dry enough to take the truck out into the pasture and gather in the cows before noon."

"Hope so," Sam answered, but the door had closed, leaving him alone for the rest of the evening. He paused by the edge of the bed and wondered if Al would pop in. A minute later he didn't care. Stripped down to his briefs, the chenille bedspread tucked under his chin, Sam was fast asleep.

Verbina bent down to pick up the tray which had barely been touched. Glancing at the man huddled in the corner of the room, she sighed loudly, hoping to catch a reaction. She was disappointed.

"You really need to eat something. Half a glass of water won't carry you through the day."

"No, thank you. I don't want anything." Again the soft refusal in a voice with a lilting accent.

Verbina straightened. "Look, if there's something special you'd like, I'd be more than happy to get it for you. Maybe you're on a special diet or something?"

A shake of the head was her answer. It was a small battle lost, but Verbina was determined not to lose the war. She turned and left the Waiting Room, pausing just outside the door to glance through the observation window. The man never moved; from the moment he'd entered the chamber,

he'd taken refuge against the far wall, drawing himself into a ball on the floor.

She'd seen a lot of misery in her time and in her practice—a lot of despair and hurt. And there had been times in the past when Sam had leapt into situations where the leapmate had been traumatized beyond belief. But this man, whoever he was, was past the hurt, past the despair, and long past misery. In other circumstances, she would have pegged him as suicidal, but he kept his turmoil inside himself. When he spoke, it was soft and to the point. He never made eye contact, nor made any attempt to examine his surroundings. It was almost as if he was...*resigned*...to whatever happened. He had no curiosity about his plight, where he was, or who the strange people were who came and went from the room. His head would raise whenever the door opened, but he would immediately lose interest.

"He reminds me of a man I used to know."

Verbina jumped, startled by the appearance of Al behind her. The glass on the tray fell over and splashed water over her clothes and onto the floor.

"Calavicci!"

"Oh, geesh, I'm sorry." He dabbed futilely at her dress with the unused napkin. "Sam's always yelling at me for sneaking up on him. I thought you knew I was there."

"It's alright, Al. It's just water." Turning again to glance at the man inside the chamber, she asked, "What do you mean, he reminds you of a man you used to know?"

Al's face changed with the memory; both his eyes and his voice darkened. "It was while I was a POW. The guy in the cage next to me, his name was Slavacik...yeah, that's right. Slavacik. From New Jersey. Just a nineteen-year-old private. Should've been home necking with his girl instead of eating the bugs that crawled over him at night."

Verbina waited patiently. He would get to the point soon—talking about his experiences, when he was ready or willing to talk about them, was a catharsis he still needed. She knew the past still returned to haunt him at night, creating nightmares which often awakened him, screaming and sweating...according to Tina. The admiral would never admit to anything.

He took a deep, shoulder-shrugging breath. "For weeks he'd keep telling me, 'We're gonna be saved, Al! They're gonna come get us soon! They know where we are, I know they do! Just you wait! Betcha twenty bucks they come before the end of the week.'" A sad chuckle choked in a throat tightening with pain. "'Betcha twenty bucks....' After a while, it became 'Betcha twenty bucks they come before winter'. Then, before spring. All the time, he got skinnier and sicker...hell, we all did. Until, finally, he just...gave...up." Al stared, unseeing, at his hands. "I was so into myself, I didn't notice how much he declined...how he'd stop trying to

bet with me until Charlie found him in his cage, dead. Oh, God...." Tears welled up in Al's eyes, and he ran the back of his hand under his nose. "I should have taken the bet, Verbina. I should have. They *did* come for us...before the spring."

Poking his finger at the observation window, Al cleared his throat and sniffed. "Near the end, Slavacik looked just like that guy, the one using Sam's body, I mean. Living one day at a time, but not really caring what happens to him. Not eating. Too tired to give a damn. Unwanted. Unloved."

Unloved. Verbina adjusted her grip on the tray, taking a half-step back. "Are you on your way to see Sam?" she softly inquired.

"Yeah."

"But you still don't have any idea who he is?"

"It's not important anymore," Al told her. "I have to warn Sam about what Ziggy found in the paper."

"What did she find?"

"That in two days Sam and an old man will be found dead at the old man's farm. But what's worse, their bodies will be found...with their heads cut off."

"I'll be *what?*" Sam forgot himself and raised his voice. Seconds later, Ketchman stuck his head around the bathroom door.

"You okay?"

"Fine, fine...I'm fine. Porcelain's cold is all."

"Get a move on, then. No time to dilly-dally. I'll be outside in the truck waitin' for you."

Sam nodded until the old man had disappeared, then turned back to where Al stood half-in half-out of the bathtub. "I'll be found with my *head* chopped off?" he asked again, this time in a hissed whisper.

Al drew a finger across his throat in a universally understood gesture. "Autopsy said it was razor clean and had to have been done by a..." he referred to the handlink, "'a non-serrated blade of considerable length and strength, possibly a sabre or sword, as the decapitation was completed in one stroke, and not a series of cuts.'"

"A sword?" Sam thought of the blade still hidden inside his coat. "Did the police report finding my sword at the scene?"

"Yes, they did. And it had blood stains on it. But the blood didn't match your type."

"Then it sounds like I died defending myself."

"Or your farmer friend," Al replied. "Ziggy says there's a seventy-four percent chance you're here to save his life."

"But who...who would want to kill Skeeter? He's just an old man whose wife is ill in the hospital. I'm going to hang around for a few days to help him with the farm. Al, have Ziggy run a background check on Mr. Ketchman. And his wife. And their children if they had any. See if there's someone they ran afoul of...a loan shark, the Mafia..."

"An irate Fuller Brush salesman."

Sam shot his friend an aggravated look. "I'm serious, Al."

"I *am* serious. Have you ever tried to tell one of those guys you don't want anything?"

"Just do what I ask. How long do I have?"

"According to the coroner, estimated time of death was sometime between ten p.m. and midnight tomorrow night."

Sam paused, his hand on the doorknob. "What happens to Mrs. Ketchman?"

"She survives, but she's paralyzed and has to be placed in an old folks' home. The farm and all is sold to help pay her bills, but it's not enough, and she dies next year flat broke."

A horn honked twice outside, interrupting the silence which followed Al's prediction. Nodding, Sam mumbled a "see you later" and walked out the door. Al casually slipped through the wall of the house and stopped outside in the yard to watch his friend hop into the passenger side of the old truck. As the truck pulled out of the dirt driveway, the handlink beeped him with a message from Gooshie.

Verbina wanted to see him. Pronto.

Saint Michel pulled his Harley up next to the gas pump at the weatherbeaten old filling station. He filled the tank with regular, then went inside the combination grocery store and ice house to pay.

Stopping beside an old chest freezer, he pulled out a bottle of Coke, then grabbed a bag of peanuts from the candy rack overhead. Taking his purchases up to the counter, he tossed a twenty-dollar bill next to the cash register. "Three bucks to top off."

An old woman was sitting in a chair behind the counter, leafing through an outdated issue of *Life* magazine. Seeing her customer stop at the register, she flashed him a dentured grin and got to her feet to take his money.

"Hiya. Just passing through?"

Saint Michel grunted and went back to pop the cap off his soda as the clerk counted out his change. As he pocketed the money, he pulled a well-worn photograph from the outer pocket of his denim jacket and showed it to her.

"Seen this man?" She peered through the bottom of her bifocals at the picture. "Gee, that's an old photo you got there. It's all brown and white. Which man are you talking about?"

Pushing a finger toward the face in the center of the picture, Saint Michel clarified. "This man. Seen him recently?"

"Well, I don't know. I mean, that picture's pretty old, and he's about middle-aged in it. He'd have to be around eighty or ninety by now, wouldn't he?"

"He still looks *just like this,"* the man replied cryptically.

The woman got a worried look on her face; her lower lip began to tremble. "I...I don't understand. How?"

Bending over the counter, Saint Michel spoke low and slow, enunciating every word. "He took his vitamins and had lots and lots of plastic surgery. Now, have you seen him around here?"

Still fearful, the old woman hesitated, then nodded her head. "Uh-huh. Came in here a couple of days ago."

A couple of days! Then he wasn't too far ahead.

"Do you know where he was heading? Did he say anything or tell you anything?"

"Are you the police or something?" the woman wanted to know.

Saint Michel smiled in spite of himself. "You could say it's my job to look for missing people." He noticed the woman was giving him a good once-over, looking for a weapon of some kind. "I don't carry a gun, if that's what you're wondering," he assured her in a gentler voice.

Pointing out the window, she answered, "He came in around one in the afternoon, looking for a couple hours' work. I told him to check at the diner down the road."

"And this was a couple of days ago?"

"That's for certain. It started to rain pretty hard that evening. I hope he found it."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well...he didn't have no car or anything. He had to walk all that way."

"And you're sure it was the same man in this picture?" Saint Michel wanted to clarify.

The old woman grinned again. "Positive. Man that good-looking ain't easy to forget. I may be past my prime, but the pump's still in working order."

Saint Michel thanked her and walked back outside to his hog. Perching on the seat, he took a deep draft of his Coke and cast an eye down the endless stretch of road which was taking on a golden glow from the setting sun.

With luck, he was less than forty-eight hours behind. If the man he sought was still on foot, he'd finally be able to catch up to him by tomorrow.

Finally—after searching for one hundred seventy-eight years.

Looking down at the package of peanuts in his hand, Saint Michel grabbed the edges of the cellophane between his fingers and tore away the ends, peeling the head of the little monocled peanut man away from the rest of his body.

One more day, MacLeod. That's all you and I have left. Just one more day. And then...I can rest.

Sam collapsed on the back of the old pickup and drew himself a paper cup of water from the Igloo cooler resting on the tailgate. The day had been cool, but the work had left him hot and sweaty. Seconds later, Ketchman joined him.

"You did good work today," the older man praised. "I can tell you're at home on a farm. Another couple of days like this, and we'll be pretty much caught up, if there's such a thing." He wiped his forehead on the shirt sleeve rolled up to his shoulder. "How you feeling?"

Sam chuckled. "Hungry."

"How's your cooking?" Ketchman inquired.

"Me?"

The old man laughed. "I hit the skillet a time or two whenever I'd spend the weekend at the deer blind, but I'm not guaranteeing how it'll taste to someone else. We could bite the bullet and try to make heads or tails out of what Lottie's got hidden in the freezer. Or we could take the coward's way out and head over to the diner." He nudged Sam in the ribs. "Marie was pretty sweet on you last night."

Sam shook his head. "I don't think that's a good idea. I mean, she's a wonderful woman, but..."

"But you're not ready to get serious and settle down? After all, Marie's a mean little cook. Might do you good to get some meat on your bones."

"What are you," Sam teased in retaliation, "my boss or my mother?"

"It might not hurt you if I was both," Ketchman quipped. He took a gulp of water, then slapped Sam on the back. "Quitting time, David. Let's act like cows and 'mooove' it."

Sam groaned over the bad pun, and smiled as he closed the tailgate before climbing into the cab.

On the drive back to the farm, he watched the fields flip by like brown stick figures in a nickelodeon. The sun turned the naturally copper-colored soil into bright orange rows, like blazing matchsticks. He drew a deep breath, relishing the thick, heady smell of the turned fields, the rich loam, and the faint fumes coming from the old truck.

There was no radio in the pickup's dash, so he started to hum an old Elvis tune to pass the time. Ketchman caught the name of the song, and in a voice slightly off-pitch began to provide some of the words, widely punctuated with "la, la-la, la's" and "dah, dee-dee, dah, dah's". Before long, both men were into the third verse and chorus, finishing as the vehicle pulled into the dirt drive.

"Tomorrow I'll have to take the tractor to the field. You'll drive the truck," Ketchman said. He hefted the empty Igloo from the back of the truck; Sam grabbed the ice chest and followed him into the house.

Just as he dumped the ice chest onto the floor, he straightened up and spotted Al standing in the middle of the dining room, motioning to him. "Uhh, I need to run to the little boy's room," Sam hurriedly said.

Ketchman's head was buried in the freezer. His muffled reply was inaudible, but Sam took it as a dismissal. As soon as he was out of earshot, Sam turned to his friend.

"Okay, what's up?"

"We ran the prints you made in the bathroom at the diner. Nada. Zip. Nothing matches in the U.S., Canada, England, or Europe. We tried everyone from Scotland Yard to Interpol to the F.B.I."

"So what do you think? That we'll never find out my identity?"

"The headstone on your grave will read 'David McDuncan' just like your driver's license. I just think that if this McDuncan character wants to remain incognito, that's his business. Although I know it's bugging you."

"It's more than bugging me!" Sam exploded emphatically. "I'm a man with no past and no future, carrying an illegal weapon that doesn't even *belong* in this day and age. We've *always* known who I was, Al! Isn't it bad enough I have to leap from one life to the next, forgetting half if not all of anything I've done? Or anyone I've been? Don't you think it's hard enough on me to have my brain swiss-cheesed time and again, so that I have to try harder and harder every time to get a grip on reality?" He ran a hand over his face in a visible effort to calm down. Al watched in silent concern. When he spoke again, it was with more control. "Does Ziggy still say I'm here to save Skeeter's life?"

Al checked the handlink, and a funny expression came over his face. "Hmm. That's odd."

"What? *What?"*

"Well, now Ziggy says there's a *sixty-one* percent chance you're here to save Mr. Ketch...Skeeter's life."

"That's down from last time," Sam observed. "But why?"

Al began punching a series of buttons on the handlink. "Let me see...here...just a minute...hmm. Sam, it's only a hunch, but I had Ziggy run a new set of circumstances. You might be interested in her prediction."

"I'm listening."

"Even though Ziggy says there's little better than a fifty-fifty chance you leaped in to save Skeeter's life, she now predicts there's a ninety-two percent probability you're here to save someone else's life instead."

"Whose?"

"Your own," he replied grimly.

Morning came swiftly, brightly, and heralded by the customary rooster. After a quick breakfast of scrambled eggs, the two men took their sack lunches and water cooler and headed out to the garage.

From a small grove of trees sitting just off the road a hundred yards from the Ketchman house, Saint Michel watched the tractor leave the dirt drive, turn onto the hardtop, and head toward him. The pickup followed close behind. Raising the binoculars, he glanced at the driver of the tractor, dismissed him, then followed the truck less than twenty feet away, focusing on the driver's side. The image of the man filling his sights was enough to send rills of excitement down his spine, and he grinned with delight. Unconsciously, he reached down and patted the holster strapped to the side of the bike's seat—and the hilt of the cutlass lying snug in its black leather case.

Tonight, MacLeod. At last, tonight.

The prickly feeling which raised the hairs on the back of his neck shocked him into alertness. His stomach knotted up, and not because of lack of food.

Oh, God. Don't tell me.

The door at the other end of the room hissed open, and he glanced up out of habit. But the woman entering the chamber with his breakfast tray was the same one who'd always looked after him. Without hesitation, he rose to his feet and stumbled over to the huge one-way mirror in the opposite wall.

"What is it?" the woman asked, suddenly apprehensive. "What's wrong? Are you ill?"

"Who's out there?" he demanded. Damn! But he had no weapon—no way to defend himself. For the first time since his arrival, he wondered about his prison.

"No one," the woman answered, and he believed her. The sense of dread was gone as quickly as it had appeared.

"Then who *was* outside the door with you?" he re-phrased the question.

The woman shook her head, perplexed. "I just got here and decided to go ahead and bring you your tray. There's a few engineers left over from the night shift, but no one else has shown up yet."

He knew she was taking a risk, letting him know she was unescorted, and as such unprotected. Turning toward her, he smiled. "It smells good. Thank you."

Still giving him a bewildered look, the woman started to leave when he stopped her. "No, please, don't go. I'd like to ask a couple of questions, if I may."

The woman paused, studying him. Suddenly she smiled, walked over to a chair beside the one-way mirror, and sat down. "Go ahead. I'll answer them as best I can. I have a few questions of my own, if you don't mind."

He looked down at the tray, raising the covers to discover a bowl of instant oatmeal, an orange peeled and divided into sections, a cup of coffee with cream and sweetener on the side, and a glazed donut.

"The donut's fresh. I picked up a box on my way to work this morning. I hope you like oatmeal. I don't know why, but I took you for the oatmeal type," she commented.

"Your instincts were correct. I grew up on gruel, or porridge, or oatmeal. Whatever you want to call it. What's your name?"

"Verbina. And yours?" She seemed hesitant at first to ask.

"Duncan."

"McDuncan?"

He eyed her over the rim of the coffee cup, and slowly lowered it. "So you do know who I am." It was not a question.

"We've seen your driver's license. But I have to be honest with you. We ran the name, but you don't exist. I mean, David McDuncan doesn't exist. Not in 1970, anyway."

"Not in 1970?" He took a spoonful of the oatmeal. It wasn't bad. "You make 1970 sound like past history," he halfway chided her.

"It is...for me," Verbina said quietly, and waited for his response.

The man finished his oatmeal before speaking again. "What year is this?"

"Nineteen ninety-nine."

"How did I get here?"

Verbina swallowed. "You were inadvertently involved in a top-secret government project. One of our doctors is currently occupying your body in your time. In the meantime, you are occupying *his* body in his time."

"Your doctor is in 1970...posing as me?"

Verbina shook her head. "No, not posing. He *is* you. And you're him. Have you looked in a mirror lately?"

Duncan shot her a look. She was telling him the truth. After living as long as he had, he could almost smell a lie before it was spoken. Walking over to the one-way mirror, he actually looked at the reflection staring back. And for the first time in nearly a hundred years, he was shocked. In the glass, he could see the woman rise and walk over to stand behind him.

"The man who is in my body, does he see me when he looks in a mirror?"

"Yes, he does."

"Does everyone else see my body when they look at me, even though I'm not in it?"

"Yes, they do."

Oh, God.

"Tell me how to get back into my body," he requested.

Verbina frowned. "That's not going to be easy."

"Why not?"

"Look, I'll make a deal with you. If you eat your breakfast, I'll tell you everything I can about what's happened to you. Agreed?"

"How do you know I won't break out of here and spill your little secret? Or worse, tell everyone I can when I go back to my own time?"

"For the same reason I knew I could tell you I was all alone this morning," she replied evenly, staring at him eye to eye.

Duncan snorted and stuffed an orange slice in his mouth. "Okay. I started. Now it's your turn."

It was already dark when the tractor and the truck pulled into the driveway and parked inside the garage. Sam and Skeeter slowly wound their way into the kitchen, collapsing in the kitchen chairs.

"I'm so tired I can't see straight," Ketchman grumbled.

"Wish Bishopsville had a pizza parlor. We could call and have one delivered," wished Sam.

Ketchman gave him a puzzled look. "What are you talking about?"

"Never mind." Sam laughed, rubbing his face across a grimy sleeve. "Do I look as bad as I smell?"

"Huh. You smell like something my dog forgot to bury. I'll flip you for who gets the tub first." Ketchman dug a coin from his pants pocket and tossed it overhead. The nickel spun in the air and descended to land on the linoleum floor.

Sam reacted first. "Heads!"

Ketchman leaned over to check. "Nope. You lose. Why don't you start peeling some potatoes while I go use up all the hot water?"

Sam agreed, getting to his feet and walking over to the sink to wash his hands. He glanced up and looked out the window over the sink, out at the silver sheen painting the lawn by the floodlight over the garage. Behind him he heard the soft grinding hiss of the accelerator doors opening and closing, and the bloop and squeal of the commlink as Al turned on the unit.

"I hope you like fairy tales, Sam, 'cause I've got one honey of a story to tell you."

"I haven't got time for fairy tales, Al. I've got less than two hours to come up with some answers, or someone or something is going to cut off my head."

"No way, my friend. This one you have to hear."

Sam turned around as he dried his hands on a cuptowel. The look on Al's face was indecipherable—but one thing was certain: he was serious—dead serious. "Okay, Al. What have you got to tell me?"

"I think...you'd better sit down for this one."

"Why do I have the feeling I'm not gonna like this?" Sam intoned.

"Sam, Verbina got the guy to speak. And, boy, did he have a story to tell her! But do you want to hear the craziest part of all this?"

"I'm waiting," Sam replied drily, but the sarcasm was lost on the Admiral.

"Your name is Duncan MacLeod, 'of the Clan MacLeod', as he likes to put it. And you're almost four hundred years old."

Sam stared straight ahead, not moving. "I'm sorry. I don't think I heard you right."

"Sure you did," Al grinned around his unlit cigar. "You have perfect hearing."

"But you said I'm...*four hundred* years old!"

"No, I said you were *almost* that old. You won't hit the big Four Zero Zero until the nineties. That's *this* century."

Sam's face flushed. He got to his feet and angrily strode over to the pantry to pull two handfuls of potatoes off the shelf and dump them into the sink. "I don't know why you're pulling such a feeble joke, Al. And to be honest, I don't want to know." Gesturing out the window, he said, "Somewhere out there is someone waiting to kill me and Skeeter...who wants to cut off our heads! And you pop in here with some cockamamie story...."

"'Cockamamie'? Gee, I haven't heard that one since the sixties."

"AL!"

"Do you *think* I came here to pull your leg, Dr. Sam-I-know-everything-Beckett?" Al shot back. "Do you think I'm looking forward to having my best friend's head served up like John the Baptist's?" Al reached out toward Sam, forgetting for the moment that his hand would only pass through the man. Frustrated, he began pacing back and forth in the kitchen, through the table and chairs and part of the counters and cabinets. Forcing himself to use a calmer tone of voice, Al continued.

"No matter what you or I think about this guy, Dr. Beeks believes him. She says he's telling us the truth, as farfetched as it sounds."

"Honestly, how could a man who looks to be in his thirties be as old as he claims to be?"

Al stopped. "He says he's an Immortal."

"A what?"

"An Immortal. And you wanna know the kicker about all this?"

Sam groaned. "I'm afraid to ask."

"MacLeod says he's not the only one. He doesn't know exactly how many there are left in the world, but he's not alone."

Sam rubbed his eyes with his fists. His mind was reeling, his muscles ached with fatigue, and his stomach was threatening to rub holes in his intestines if he didn't get supper started. Not to mention what Ketchman would say when he walked back into the kitchen and found nothing accomplished.

"I don't get it, Sam," Al continued. "If what he's telling us is the truth, and this guy's nearly four hundred years old, then he's lived...five of your lifetimes. What could you do as him that he couldn't do as himself? Wait a minute, did that make sense?"

"Al...look...give me a few minutes to think about this. Why don't you go find Verbina and have her ask this man a couple of questions for me."

"Sure. What?"

"Find out why he's travelling around with a giant steak knife hidden in the lining of his overcoat. And see if he has any idea who committed...who will attempt to kill him and Skeeter."

"Do you think he knows the person responsible?" Al pondered.

Sam shrugged. "It's worth a try. Oh, and one more thing."

"Yeah?"

"See if you can find out why he's using an alias. See if Duncan MacLeod is running from the authorities, being concealed by the government, or just using a pen name. But for my own peace of mind, I want to know why he had to steal the identity of a dead three-year-old child. And, Al...do it quick. My time's running out."

"But what if he *is* an Immortal?"

"Al, there are no such things as Immortals."

"Yeah, well you said the same thing about ghosts and vampires, too, if you remember."

Sam turned around to retort, but Al had disappeared before he could answer. Shaking his head, Sam turned back to the potatoes in the sink—and froze. A figure stood on the lawn, silhouetted against the cold white light of the floodlamp, facing the direction of the house. With the kitchen light on over the sink, Sam knew whoever was outside could see him plainly and clearly.

Immediately, Sam slapped at the switch to kill the light and backed up until he came up against the refrigerator on the other side of the kitchen. His breathing echoed loud and ragged in his own ears; his heart seemed to beat just as audibly.

For in that same impersonal security light, Sam had caught the glitter of steel reflected in the stranger's hand. The flash of a blade longer and wider than any sword he had ever seen before in his own short life.

This time he was expecting her when she walked through the door with his tray, but he remained seated on the floor in the corner of the room—as he usually did.

Verbina sensed something different, something changed in the way he watched her, but was unable to put her finger on just what tipped her off. She set the tray down on the observation table, crossed her arms, and pivoted around to wait him out. "Stare at me any harder, and you'll burn holes in my back," she commented drily.

MacLeod smirked. "You're not what I expected in a shrink."

"Why? Because I don't wear a monocle and speak pidgin English with a German accent?"

"No...because you never doubted me. You know nothing about me except what I've told you, and you accept my word as gospel."

Verbina walked over to where he sat and leaned against the wall. In a soft voice, she said, "Mr. MacLeod, since I've been working here at Project Quantum Leap, I've seen just about anything and everything you could imagine come into this room. I've counseled everyone from rape victims to students with suicidal tendencies. I've comforted mental patients, convicted criminals, and one time a chimpanzee. That's right, a chimp. Once we even believed we were harboring a vampire. So your claiming a long life span doesn't shock me, Mr. MacLeod."

"Then you don't believe me."

She shrugged her shoulders. "It's not up to me whether or not I believe you. My job is to make sure you remain healthy so that when it's time for Sam to leap and send you back into your own body, you do so safely."

MacLeod suddenly stiffened. His eyes dulled, his vision turned inward, and his face visibly paled.

"What? What is it?" Verbina immediately asked, laying a hand on his shoulder.

The man swallowed. "Another Immortal. There's another Immortal nearby."

"What do you mean?"

He looked at her, his face stony. "Immortals can sense when another of their kind is nearby. I can't explain how or why. But right now I feel the presence of one."

"Here? At the Project?"

"I...I don't know." For a moment he appeared confused. "Normally I can tell exactly where they are. In another room, across the street.... This time I can't pinpoint the location. It feels...*distant.*" He tossed his head as if he could clear it. At that moment, Al swept through the Waiting Room door.

"Oh, good. Gooshie said you were in here," he said to Verbina. "Sam wants you to check up on a couple of things for him regarding our visitor."

"Al, Mr. MacLeod says there's another Immortal nearby."

Al paused. "You mean *here?*"

MacLeod slowly got to his feet. "No, not here...at least I don't think so."

"How can you tell? Is it their aftershave, or did they forget to put on deodorant this morning?"

"Admiral," Verbina interceded in a no-nonsense voice.

MacLeod raised a hand toward her. "It's alright. I know he's skeptical. After four hundred years, I've met enough of them."

Again, the tone of his voice raised the hairs on the back of her head, and Verbina stared intently at the soul of the man inhabiting Dr. Beckett's body. The Immortal continued.

"Call it a sixth sense, sir. But I feel another of my kind nearby."

On a hunch, Al began punching information into his handlink. "Could you possibly be picking up your vibes through Sam?"

"What do you mean?" Verbina asked.

Al looked up. "Ziggy!"

A succulent voice floated above their heads. "Yes, Admiral?"

"Is Sam in any danger at the moment?"

"You mean, other than cutting off the tip of a finger from trying to peel potatoes?"

"You know what I mean, you leftover Edsel engine!"

"No need to get huffy, Admiral. Dr. Beckett is presently in the kitchen where you left him. But there is another presence waiting outside the house."

"Is he armed?" MacLeod shouted.

Ziggy paused for several seconds before answering. "I can detect a weapon of sorts, but am unable to be more specific."

Verbina turned to MacLeod. "Could you be sensing the man waiting for Sam? Could that man be an Immortal?"

Al headed for the door. "Ziggy, home me in on that stranger. I'll be back," he said over his shoulder. And he was gone.

The Immortal slumped against the wall, dropping his chin into his chest with a sigh. Placing a hand on his arm, Verbina tried to smile.

"He'll be okay. Don't worry."

"No, no." He shook his head. "You can't begin to understand. You can't begin to fathom...." His voice cracked a little.

"Try me."

Laying a hand over hers, MacLeod smiled slightly. "Four hundred years is a very, very long time to live. To face the world alone. Sometimes you wish for death, for a final end to everything. And sometimes...you even go out seeking it."

"Seeking death?" she whispered.

"Seeking it, wanting it. Tired of living."

"Tired of being alone." Verbina squeezed his hand. It was all beginning to make sense to her—his complete lack of interest in what was happening to him, the poor appetite, the emptiness in his eyes. "Haven't you ever been married? I mean, do your kind get married? Or have children?"

"We're sterile. If there are any children, they're adopted. And some of us...some Immortals are lucky enough to find a mate who's compassionate and understanding enough to love someone like us. Who's willing to spend the rest of their life growing old while their husband or wife remains strong and youthful-looking. Some...but not all."

"So there are also female Immortals?"

"I've met a few," was his answer.

Verbina ventured to ask. "Have...you? Ever found that one special woman?"

Several seconds passed before he answered quietly, "No. You have to take the risk. You have to take the chance and allow yourself to become close to a woman, close enough to tell her the truth and hope she

doesn't leave you in fear or disdain. And you have to be willing to face the rejection if she does."

The silence lengthened before MacLeod took a deep, shuddering breath and continued. "Maybe it is an Immortal I'm feeling. Maybe he's back in my time while I'm here in your friend's...."

"But because you're still linked with him, you're able to sense the other immortal's presence through Dr. Beckett," she finished.

"It's possible. Hell, anything's possible. And with any luck, I'll finally get my wish."

At that, Verbina stiffened. A cold wash of fear splashed over her. "What do you mean, you'll get your wish?"

MacLeod refused to meet her eyes. "Some Immortals are the good guys. We fight for causes we think are just in order to make the world a little better place to live in. And then there are others who are out to enrich their lives, regardless of the price paid by normal humans. It's those evil Immortals who go about hunting down, trying to find the good ones."

"Why?"

"To kill them. So they won't have to worry about the good ones finding them out and spoiling their fun."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute." Verbina held up her hands. "I thought you said you were Immortal? In my dictionary, that means you *can't* die."

"Oh, we *can* die...eventually."

Her eyes widened. "How?"

"If you cut off our heads."

"Ohmygod!" She took a step back in shock. MacLeod reached for her to steady her.

"What's wrong? What did I say?"

She swallowed. Hard. "That's...that's what happened. Uhh, *will* happen. We think Dr. Beckett leaped into your body to prevent your murder."

"My murder?" MacLeod was thunderstruck. "I was decapitated?"

Nodding, Verbina bit down on the back of her hand and turned toward the door. Suddenly the door opened up once again and Al blew in. At the same time, a section of the far wall shimmered, turning dark like a screen.

"You two were right!" he announced. "There's a guy watching the house where Sam is, and he's carrying around this big pirate-looking sword whatever! Ziggy! I'm ready when you are!" Back at the two observers, he continued.

"Sam had a little camera-like gizmo installed into my commlink. I went back and got the nozzle's mug shot, which Ziggy's gonna throw up on the wall. Just look and see if you recognize him." Al pointed the

commlink at the darkened area of the wall, and a small beam of light emanated from the front of it. On the screen they could see the backlit features of the man stalking the farmhouse.

MacLeod stiffened. "Saint Michel."

"You know him?" Al queried.

"Is he an Immortal?" questioned Verbina.

"An Immortal, and an old enemy. He blames me for the death of his son, his adopted son, some years ago."

"Uhh," Al waved his cold cigar in front of his face, "how many years ago are we talking about?"

"Gerard Saint Michel was beheaded during the French Revolution. Armand blames me for sending him to his death."

Al stuttered. "The *French Revolution?* But that started almost two hundred years ago!"

MacLeod turned back to the image on the wall. "One hundred and eighty-one, to be precise. And he's been looking for me for nearly all that time."

"And...did you? Did you send him to prison?" Verbina wanted to know, although she couldn't explain why. "Were you responsible?"

"Gerard was a self-serving, vain, and vindictive man. His sole aim in life was money. In his quest for gold, he sent eighteen people to the guillotine just so he could seize their estates. Yes, to answer your question. I was the one who denounced him to the authorities. And I watched the day he rode the tumbril. When Armand finally determined whose name was on the arrest warrant, he swore he'd track me down, even if it took centuries. He's been chasing me ever since, bent on revenge."

"Well, now he's caught up with you," Al spat in a hard voice. "Or rather, he's found Sam. And he's gonna try and cut off Sam's head."

"No, it's me he's after. Not your friend."

Al corrected him. "No, it's *you* who doesn't understand. Sam looks like you, so for all intents and purposes, he is you to this Saint Michel guy. So when this guy cuts off a head, it'll be yours, but the person dying will be *Sam!* "

Verbina tried to clarify. "You will still be alive here in Dr. Beckett's body. And our friend will have died in your place."

"And people will think it was me?"

Al nodded. "Unless we can think of a way to help Sam out of this pickle. Quick!"

MacLeod stepped forward. "Then tell me, my strangely-dressed friend, can your friend wield a sword?"

"You mean, can he fence? Sure! Sam's an expert in lots of those martial arts...kung fu, jujitsu, chow mein.... He can handle that pig-sticker of yours. By the way, that's a fine piece of craftsmanship. An antique?"

MacLeod smiled reminiscently. "It was a gift. A token of gratitude from a man whose life I saved. He was a good friend, a Japanese with the unlikely name of Blackthorne." Rubbing his eyes, he added, "Even with his training, I hope it's enough."

Al's jaw dropped. "Uh-oh. I don't like the sound of that. Why do you hope it's enough? What kind of Immortal is this Saint Michel character, anyway?"

"One who has six hundred years of experience over me." There was stunned silence.

"You mean this guy is a *thousand* years old?" Al nearly yelled.

MacLeod frowned. "That's exactly what I'm saying."

Something was wrong. Saint Michel gripped the handle of the cutlass until his hand cried in pain. Around him the sounds of the night flowed on as if nothing was amiss—a breeze tickled the leaves on the trees, chickens clucked and shifted in their sleep, an insect buzzed past close to his face. The temperature had dipped suddenly in the past hour so that he shivered involuntarily.

The man in the house, the man he'd seen through the window—*he was* Duncan MacLeod. There was no doubt. He knew those features as well as he knew his own; he'd stared enough times as the faded photograph he carried to have memorized every crease and pore of the man's face.

But it wasn't there. That *feeling*...it wasn't there! That sense of warning, of the icy fingers running over his nerves and his blood racing through his veins—the warning signals which overcame him whenever he was near another Immortal...*they weren't there!*

A creak at the back door. Instinctively Saint Michel knew his adversary was emerging from the house, but the floodlight impeded his vision. It was dark around the back porch. Stepping aside but keeping the mercury lamp to his back, Saint Michel lifted the wide blade with both hands. He poised, feet planted firmly apart, and waited. Almost two hundred years would come together, finally, tonight.

Sam kept carefully to the shadows as he slipped out the back door to confront the stranger standing on the lawn. It had taken several precious minutes to explain to Ketchman what was happening, and to elicit a promise that the old man would go out the front door and run for the nearest neighbor's house and safety.

As soon as the farmer was away, Sam had put on the overcoat, drawing the long, beautiful sword from its sheath, and gone out onto the porch. The chill evening air nipped his nose; it smelled as if it wanted to rain again.

"MacLeod, I'm waiting for you."

"Sam."

Sam turned his head to find Al suspended over the porch steps. Barely whispering, he asked, "Is this the guy who's gonna cut off my head?"

Al whispered back, momentarily forgetting that no one else could hear him. "He's an Immortal, too, Sam. But he's a *thousand* years old, as compared to your, or your body's, four hundred. And he's got a cutlass."

"A cutlass?"

"Yeah, one of those big pirate things, with a wide, curvy blade."

"I know what a cutlass looks like, Al."

"The wait is over, MacLeod. There's no more running from me now. Come out and face your fate!"

"Sam, you gotta defeat this guy!" Al hissed. "You gotta...cut off his head!"

"Why?"

"Why? You want *War and Peace* or the *Readers' Digest* version? You had his son killed two hundred years ago, but the nozzle had it coming. Now this Saint Michel is out for revenge."

"He's been tracking me, uhh, MacLeod for two hundred years?"

Al nodded. "Pretty close. And if you hadn't stopped here to help out this old man, he wouldn't have caught up with you."

"MacLeod!"

"I'm coming! Just hold your horses!" Sam hollered back. Dropping his voice once more, he asked his friend, "The only chance I have of defeating him is to cut off his head?"

"You can do it, Sam. You learned all those martial arts swings and blocks. You're an expert."

"Yes, but there's a big difference between seven years' experience and seven hundred!"

"You gotta try."

"I know, I know. Go...go back to the Waiting Room and see if you can find any information about Saint Michel. And see if MacLeod can remember if this man's got an Achilles heel. A weak spot. *Something* I can use in my favor."

"I'll be back before you know it," Al promised. "In the meantime, stall."

Sam sighed. "Do I have any choice?" But the rhetorical question fell onto cold, moist November air.

MacLeod slowly stepped out of the shadows with his sword poised in front of him, both hands wrapped around the hilt. Fifteen feet away, he stopped and balanced himself on the balls of his feet.

Saint Michel smiled without humor. "It's been many a year, MacLeod. I've never forgotten. I've never given up. And so...now...here we are at last."

"You're still determined to have my head?"

"You could say it's been my lifelong dream." Again Saint Michel smiled. However, little worms of doubt had begun to nibble away in the back of his mind. The man he'd sought for centuries was less than two lunges before him, yet *still* he felt nothing. No warning, no apprehension. Nothing. It was eerie.

And now, there was something else.

Cocking his head, Saint Michel switched his blade from his left to his right hand. Gradually he started to circle around his opponent, careful to keep the glare of the lamp out of his eyes.

MacLeod compensated by keeping his sights on the cutlass which Saint Michel continued to flip from one hand to another, as if the weight and balance were no problem. Yet, Saint Michel realized the man's movements were stiff, not smooth. MacLeod held himself awkwardly, and he bore his blade as though it were a shield instead of a weapon—as if he were unfamiliar with it.

This isn't right. MacLeod is a master. Why would he stumble and falter like this? Why would he act as if he'd never dueled to the death before?

The more he pondered the inconsistencies, the more he worried. This shouldn't be. An Immortal and his blade were One. The blade was Life; an Immortal was the Master. Together they were a Force of unimaginable magnitude.

"Prepare yourself, Highlander," Saint Michel growled. "Your end is at hand." And raising the cutlass over his head, the Frenchman charged.

Sam threw his sword in front of his face to block the charge. The blades rang together, sparks flew from the contact, and the impact forced him to stumble back a few steps.

Again Saint Michel roared after him like a mad bull and brought the cutlass down in a wide arc, aiming for the chest. Sam held his weapon crossways, shoving outward, deflecting the blow. In retaliation he lunged but only managed to nick the edge of the man's shirt.

Howarth '93

"Touché, Highlander. But you haven't drawn first blood."

Sam wiped his face on the sleeve of his coat. "Give me time, Saint Michel. I'm just warming up."

The Immortal straightened and looked momentarily dazed. Sam noticed his hesitation. "What's the matter? Having second thoughts?" he taunted.

Saint Michel frowned. "Your mode of speech. It's different."

"Oh?"

"You pride yourself on your heritage, Highlander. Yet, now the brogue is gone. And you use phrases foreign to your tongue." Staring intently at his prey, the Immortal asked, "Why have you changed?"

Stall...STALL....

"A lot can happen in two hundred years. Normal men have changed in less time."

"No," Saint Michel shook his head in denial. "Not true for you. In all the years I've followed you, hoping to catch up with you, the trail you left behind never differed from the man I knew during the Revolution. You were...as predictable as the changing of the seasons."

"Until now?"

"Until now."

"And it bothers you?"

Saint Michel suddenly yelled and lunged toward Sam. Miraculously, Sam jumped aside in time, bringing his sword down to deflect the upswing and cut. Again the blades sang, and again light flashed from the impact.

Puffing, Sam wiped his sweaty palms on the legs of his jeans and backed away. There was nothing to compare with the vengeful strikes of the Immortal. No amount of mastering the martial arts had prepared him for the all-out, no-rules, and no-holds-barred bloodlust in the man's attack.

Unless a miracle occurred, Sam knew he was a dead man postponing the inevitable.

"Sam! Look out!"

Al's scream shocked him out of his reverie, but not before the cutlass whistled close enough to peel a strip of coat, shirt, and skin off his shoulder. Blood began to soak into the material.

Saint Michel saluted. "It would seem that I have drawn first blood."

"Sam, the news ain't so good. The reason MacLeod's been avoiding this guy for so long is because he knew he couldn't beat him!"

"Oh, great."

"Yes, it is," Saint Michel agreed.

"I'm not finished, though. Not by a long shot."

Beckoning toward him, the Immortal invited, "Why don't you show me your strength with that puny blade, Highlander? Prove to me I need fear you."

Sam glanced at Al, who gave him a look of helplessness in return. "Maybe you'll get lucky?" Al suggested.

Taking a deep breath, Sam hefted the sword and frantically wracked his brain for defensive strategies. He knew, though, that he needed to rely more on his inherent skills and abilities if he were to best Saint Michel at his own game.

Acting purely on instinct, Sam swung his blade, twirled, and aimed with a lunge toward the legs. The Immortal dodged, meeting his blade, but a look of surprise crossed his face. Sam attacked again, flashing his weapon in a series of vicious thrusts and strikes. The cutlass was always there to meet him. Yet, for a split second, Sam thought he detected indecision in the Immortal's parry.

"He looks confused, Sam."

Yes, he does.

Sam took advantage of the moment and swung upward and outward. The blade nicked the edge of Saint Michel's chin, and blood began to drip from the wound. Saint Michel's face darkened—whether from pain or anger, it was difficult to tell.

"What kind of joke are you playing, MacLeod?"

"Joke? What joke?"

"If I weren't so sure you were the real Duncan MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod, I would swear you were someone else." He paused. "But you *are* the man who sent my son to his death. You *are* the man I've been tracking for the last two centuries. *Are you not?"* The last was shouted as the man stood trembling in the artificial light.

"He's starting to crumble, Sam. Now's your chance!"

Sam took a step forward. "If I weren't the man you were looking for...what would you do?"

"You are! *You are!* The face! The blade! But why can't I feel you? Why do you attack me like a child on his first day of practice? *What kind of trick is this?"*

Sam seized the moment to rush the Immortal. Barely in time, Saint Michel batted away the sword, then swung to retaliate. Sam caught the swing and deflected it, hearing the shearing squeal of metal running across metal.

Breathing heavily from the exertion, Sam stepped back. His arms ached, his back and shoulders ached, and he could feel chills beginning to spread across his chest. Raising his sword, he waited for Saint Michel's next move.

MacLeod turned to look at Verbina. "He hasn't got a chance."

"Don't think that," she admonished him. "He has to defeat Saint Michel if he's to leap."

"But if he doesn't, does that mean I'm to be kept here a prisoner...for the rest of my life?" The last had been said with a slightly humorous tone, but the question was completely serious.

Verbina acquiesced. "We've always known that there was the possibility that Sam could die during a leap. And we would have to adjust the survivor to life in the twenty-first century."

"Well, that shouldn't be too much of a stretch for me, considering I've celebrated the emergence of the last four."

They stood to the side of the Imaging Chamber, watching as Al interacted with Sam while Dr. Beckett fought for his life. MacLeod studied the duel, scrutinizing Saint Michel and his reactions although they couldn't hear what was being said.

Suddenly he turned to Verbina. "Can you contact Al while he's in there?"

"Uhh, yes. I mean, Gooshie can. He's at the controls right now. Why?"

"Take me there," MacLeod demanded.

"Now? I...I can't!"

He grabbed her arm and squeezed. "If you want to save your friend's life, take me there!"

Without further question, Verbina led him from the room to the control center where Gooshie stood over the multi-colored console. MacLeod glanced over the alien expanse, then up at the globe embedded in the ceiling.

"I need you to tell my other self something!" he called out.

A voice from overhead smoothly inquired, "What should I relay to Dr. Beckett?"

"The man he's fighting is using a cutlass. It could break the blade my other self is using if he continues to hack with it. Tell him he needs to *stab* with it! Do you understand?"

"What would that accomplish against an Immortal, when the only way...."

"We can still be hurt!" MacLeod interrupted. "We're not invulnerable. We can still feel pain! And if it's serious enough, our bodies go into a type of coma until we heal ourselves. Tell him to jab with the sword! It might give him the advantage he needs!"

"Do it, Ziggy," Gooshie ordered.

"Very well," Ziggy sulked. "I've informed Admiral Calavicci."

"Do you really think it could work?" Verbina spoke up.

"Saint Michel looks confused and perplexed. My guess is he can't feel me the way I can feel him. He doesn't sense your friend is an Immortal and that bothers him. It's thrown him off-guard. Also, your friend doesn't fight the way I do, the way a trained Immortal with hundreds of years' experience would. That could just be the edge your friend needs to defeat him."

"I hope so," she prayed.

Sam blinked as he digested the information Al had just fed him. Jab, don't parry. And take full advantage of Saint Michel's confusion.

I just hope my arms hold out.

He stepped forward and feinted, throwing the blade in a narrow arc. Saint Michel took the feint, realizing too late the deception, and suffered a cut across his biceps. Wordlessly, he began to slash at Sam, driving the man back across the lawn with each pounding blow. All Sam could do was to try and deflect each downward swing and hope for an opening.

It came when he stumbled and fell to his knees in the grass. Exhaustion made him lose his focus for a few precious seconds, and Saint Michel used them to press his advantage. Grasping the cutlass with both hands and raising it over his head, Saint Michel prepared to cleave Sam's head in two when Sam suddenly grabbed the hilt of the sword and thrust up and out with every last ounce of strength. The blade slid into the Immortal's stomach, through his lungs, and exited just below his shoulder blades. Saint Michel gasped, quivering from the blow, and dropped the cutlass. Reaching for the hilt of the sword, he started to topple sideways, glaring at Sam with fiery eyes.

Sam rose to his feet and watched as the Immortal collapsed before him.

"You did it, Sam! You beat that biscuit eating sonofagun! Now cut his head off! Go ahead, you gotta do it! Cut his head off before he wakes up!" Al jumped up and down for joy.

"What does...what does Ziggy say happens when I do?"

Al consulted the commlink. "Well, she says that Mister Greenjeans lives, and that his wife recovers enough to come home where they have eight more happy years together."

"And MacLeod? What about him?" Sam wanted to know. Needed to know.

Verbina smiled up at the face of the Immortal. "It's all over but the final blow."

"I know," MacLeod sighed. "I just hope I'm there in person when Saint Michel meets his end, so that I can benefit from his Quickening."

"Then...then what'll you do? Where will you go?"

MacLeod shrugged, managing a half-grin. "Does it matter? Does any of it matter anymore?"

"It does to me," Verbina replied defensively. "It does to all of us. We didn't manage to save your life just so you could throw it away at a later date."

"Yes, but your friend is fighting a cause. He has a meaning and a purpose in life. He has the will to live. I thought that you, Verbina, of all people, understood how I'm feeling right now."

She smiled again, but this time with a twinkle in her eye. MacLeod looked at her suspiciously.

"What? What is it you're not telling me?"

"I'm not telling you because I can't. I can't tell you what your future will be because it might change my present."

"But you said there was a chance I'd forget all of this when I go back," he reminded her.

Sighing, she massaged the bridge of her nose. "Sometimes, but not every time. There have been cases where the leapee remembered some of where he'd been. However, I will tell you this much." She reached over and took his hand, enjoying its callused warmth as she squeezed it. Staring him straight in the eye, she said, "One of your greatest wishes is to find that one woman who'll spend the rest of her life with you, isn't it?"

"Will I find her?" MacLeod asked, suddenly excited. "Will it be soon? Who? Who is it? What is her name? Where can I find her?"

"Mr. MacLeod, I cannot tell you everything. But...let me ask you this. How do you feel about antiques?"

MacLeod leaned back. "Antiques?" He studied her for a moment longer.

"Well?"

"I guess you could say...I'm an expert in that field," he ventured cautiously .

"I'll agree with you there. So tell me, how long has it been since you were in France? Think it's safe enough to go back there, now that Saint Michel is out of your way? I think you might enjoy some of the changes that have occurred in the past two hundred years."

Understanding finally dawned on the Immortal, and he kissed Verbina's hand in gratitude.

But he never got a chance to thank her.

Murmuring a heartfelt prayer, Sam raised the blade over his head, and with the last of his strength, brought it down over the back of Saint Michel's neck. The sword bit as the velvety blue aura enveloped him, swallowed him, and carried him away on the whims of chance.

There Are More Things in Heaven and Earth...
(October 31, 1993)

by Sharon Wells

"This way, Sam. Just keep the light facing this direction," Al shouted over the crashing sea and pounding waves.

Huddled in a small life raft with a twelve-year-old girl, fighting exhaustion and hypothermia, Sam Beckett held up an arm that already like aching lead and focused the beam of light at and through Al.

The girl clung desperately to him, seeing not Sam Beckett but her mother. He could feel her body shivering against his own, which the doctor in him recognized as a good sign. She still had energy enough to shiver; much more exposure to the frigid winds and rain, though, and they would both succumb.

"It's nearly here, Sam. Keep that light aimed this way!" Al's voice rose with excitement, causing a smile to tug at Sam's mouth. If not for Al, he would never have known which direction to shine the light in.

Ziggy's theory was that Sam had leaped into this rather precarious position in order to save the mother and daughter. Only a computer with Ziggy's capacity and a hologram version of Al could have figured out where the steamer would be, when it would be there, then help Sam to aim his flashlight in the right direction.

Al's enthusiasm and drive also helped Sam keep awake, when he would much have preferred sinking into sleep, from which there might be no waking.

"They're turning! They're coming this way! Sam, you did it!" All was jumping up and down apparently atop the waves, but Sam realized his buddy was really standing on the solid floor of the imaging chamber.

"You did it, Al," he whispered. His throat was raw, and he could tell he was in for one hell of a cold.

"What, mommy?" The frightened girl looked up at Sam, her wet face white in the beam of the flashlight.

"I said we're gonna be rescued. The ship's coming, sweetheart. I can see it." Sam hugged her close, hoping some of his warmth would help. Looking beyond her, he could see the approaching steamer, with search lights criss-crossing the thrashing waves and a small boat being lowered down the side.

Al whooped with joy.

Sam sneezed, then felt the all-too familiar energy flowing through his body that signaled another leap.

* * *

Sneezing, Sam found himself still chilled to the bone, but he was in a soft bed, his head nestled against an even softer pillow. He blindly reached down for a blanket, pulled it over himself, and turned on his side. He could sleep for a year.

It might have been mere minutes or long hours later that the sound of someone calling out reached him. Sam opened his eyes and was immediately aware of the fact that he was sick. That was strange; he'd never been sick since he had started leaping. A very loud sneeze followed by searing pain in his throat and lungs convinced him, if he had any trace of doubt, that he was indeed a very ill man.

"Nick? Nick?" It was a woman's voice, and she was coming closer. Where was Al? Sam had absolutely no idea who he was without Al's help.

Sitting up in bed, he rubbed his face. He needed a shave.

"Nick? Was that you who sneezed?"

Sam saw a woman standing at the doorway of the dimly illuminated bedroom. Was she Nick's wife? Sister?

"Yeah. I think I'm sick." He accented that with a cough.

"You're kidding." She came swiftly to the bed, removing her coat as she did so. "You *never* get sick." She reached out a hand to touch his forehead, then withdrew it quickly, as if she'd been burned. "You *are* sick! I can't believe it."

"Do you have any Tylenol?" Sam asked. "I think I have a fever."

"You want Tylenol?" She sounded shocked and for the life of him, Sam couldn't imagine why.

"I'm not allergic to it, am I?" he asked.

"Well...not that we know of." She was staring at him, her big brown eyes wide.

"Then I'd like to get this fever down."

She sat on the edge of the bed. "What are you going to swallow them with?"

That struck Sam as a very strange question. "Water?"

"Water?" she echoed. "Really?"

"Really." He wasn't up to this. He just wanted sleep—and a big bowl of steaming chicken noodle soup.

"Okay, Nick."

She stood and left. He could hear her shoes clicking down the stairs, then the sound of her rummaging through the cupboards downstairs. Why would she think his simple request was so strange?

"Hi, Sam." Al's hand unit flashing brightly in the darkened room.

"Al! Am I glad to see you." Sam began to cough again. This time he couldn't stop it until his eyes were watering and he flopped back exhausted against the pillows.

"Boy, are you sick!" Al looked concerned. "This has never happened before, has it?"

"No." Sam shook his head emphatically. It seemed to cause the room to swirl, so he stopped.

"Well, this leap is a little unusual, too." Al smiled very briefly.

Sam waited for him to continue.

"You see, Sam, you're now Nick Knight, a detective on the Toronto police force. It's 5:15 p.m. here, and you're due at work in another forty-five minutes."

"I'll just have to call in sick," Sam said.

"That's a bit of a problem. According to our guest in the waiting room, he's being accused by a maniac of being a vampire. He has to prove he's not."

Sam began to have a bad feeling about this leap.

* * *

As Dr. Andrew Desais—alias Max Schreck, alias Vlad Tepes, alias Dracula—read the newspaper, a frown tugged down the corners of his handsome face. That idiot Martin Planting was doing it again! Twice he had tracked Andrew down and attempted to destroy him. Now he was in Toronto trying to discredit a police detective, who was probably no more than a man who worked the night shift.

"I'm going to make this Planting idiot look like the fool he is!" Andrew swore out loud, crumbling the paper in fine, long-fingered hands that were considerably stronger than those of any human.

The "Planting idiot" was getting too close, much too close. Andrew practiced medicine in a quiet rural area about thirty miles north of Toronto. For three years he had led a peaceful existence—and now *this* had to happen.

Picking up the phone, Andrew dialed his hospital.

It quite literally was *his* hospital, since he was not only the night shift's emergency room doctor, but also the majority stockholder. Living for several hundred years gave one ample opportunity to see one's investments grow, and he would never lack money. He was a doctor, because he

had at long last overcome the madness which had descended upon him when he had been turned into a vampire in the mid fifteenth century.

Since realizing the misery he had caused to countless generations of humans, Andrew had decided to go into medicine in order to give a little back to humankind. He never killed anymore, but simply availed himself of supplies from the blood bank or took small sips from those ladies who seemed more than willing to indulge in affaires with him.

There were still times when his temper threatened to overcome his cultivated self-restraint, and there had been one time a few years before when he had killed, but other than that single slip, Andrew had been the model of self-control.

Martin Planting's latest exploits threatened to destroy all of that. If he was in Toronto, the only reason could be that he was tracking Andrew down. This poor Knight fellow just happened to get in the way.

As Andrew explained to the hospital that he was taking an emergency leave of absence, and while he arranged to have his hours there covered, he wondered if Knight might possibly be a vampire. After all, the monster who had turned him was still out there, as far as Andrew knew. Might he have created more of their kind?

It was even conceivable that there were other vampires much older than the infamous Vlad Tepes. Yes. That was something else Andrew had to take into consideration, for the Elders could be quite dangerous if they came from the right vampire family.

To date, Andrew had come across very few vampires in the "new world," as he still thought of the Americas. Most of the Elders he had met had been in Europe prior to the twentieth century. It was actually in the sixteenth century that he had begun to understand that a vampire's sire and family had a lot to do with how powerful one might become. Luckily for Andrew, his own vampire sire had been quite powerful, even if a trifle eccentric.

Once his business with the hospital was settled, Andrew picked up his car keys and went toward the garage. First things first—he would visit Nick Knight and see just what sort of creature he really was.

* * *

"So...Natalie must think you're a vampire, too." Al shrugged. It had taken a few minutes to work things out, but eventually the person in the waiting room, Ziggy, and Sam's current leap all came into focus. It was frightening.

"Do you mean to say he really is a vampire?" Sam asked, wondering if he was having some sort of fevered delirium.

Al lowered the hand holding with the everpresent cigar. "Well...after we started to talk to him, we had a few questions, so we sent a doctor in. Nick wouldn't let her touch him. So then we began to dig into his past. He's got tons of stuff on record in the police computers here in Toronto, but it all starts just a few years ago, and a lot of the history before that is bogus."

"No wonder Natalie was surprised when I asked for Tylenol," Sam whispered, as he heard her returning up the stairs. She had called up about ten minutes ago to announce there was no Tylenol in the house, then had left to get some. She had just returned moments before.

"Well, you've got to take something. You're sick," Al said, as if Sam didn't already know that.

"At least Nick has Kleenex in the house." Sam got the tissue to his nose just in time to cover it before another sneeze jarred him.

"Okay, Nick." Natalie handed him the box of Tylenol and a glass of water, then perched herself on the side of the bed and watched as Sam opened the box, pulled out the bottle, fumbled with the child-proof cap, finally pried it off, and pulled out the plug of cotton.

He tipped two tablets into his hand, popped them into his mouth, then drank the entire glass of water.

Natalie looked flabbergasted. "You really drank it!"

"Natalie," Sam smiled at her, "there's more tricks up my sleeve. I'd like a bowl of chicken noodle soup. Do you think you could manage that?"

"You've got to be kidding!" Her hand reached out to touch his still-warm forehead. "Is this some kind of stunt? What do you think you're going to do? Confront this Planting guy in a restaurant or something?"

"Good idea. In a restaurant during lunch."

"During lunch? Do you mean...daylight?"

"Have no fear." Sam wondered how an intelligent woman like Natalie—who Al had informed him was an M.D. and Coroner—could swallow the fact that Nick was a vampire. Then again, with all the strange things in the world, Sam wondered if Nick really *was* a vampire.

"I'm going to call in sick tonight, eat my soup, then sleep," Sam told Natalie.

"You really are sick, aren't you?" Her eyes narrowed. "How did you do it?"

"I have help." Sam looked past her at Al.

"Okay. I'm going to whip you up the best chicken noodle soup that's ever been created. It will take a while. How hungry are you?"

"Very."

"Then instead of that, I'll go down to the deli and get it. You're really going to drink it?"

"Really."

"This is unbelievable. Do you think you've been cured, Nick?" She stood and stared at him. "Could catching a common cold have cured you?"

"We'll see."

Sam and Al watched her leave in silence.

"You act as if you really believe our guest is a...vampire," Al said.

"'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio....'"*

"I know. I know." Al looked worried. "I'm just wondering what we're going to give him for dinner."

❋ ❋ ❋

Andrew's dark green Jeep pulled up into the police parking lot. It was a warm night, especially for this time of year, and the leaves were already turning to shades of brilliant orange, red and gold. Andrew could still remember how the forests of his homeland looked, glistening in the autumn sunlight.

The glass door of the police station stopped him. He could not enter unless invited in, so he waited until a uniformed officer was leaving, then asked, "Is this where one goes to report a crime?"

"Just go in to the main desk," the officer said helpfully. He even held the door open.

Andrew walked in, catching his own reflection in the glass surface of the doors. He wondered if Martin Planting even realized that vampires did cast reflections; it was not mirrors that were the problem, but silver. How that had gotten so twisted through myth was something Andrew had often wondered about, but accepted and appreciated.

He was also very glad to see that a woman was at the information desk, her curly blonde head turned toward an amber computer monitor. It was much easier dealing with the fair sex when he was after something and a little persuasion was needed.

"Excuse me," he spoke in his most polite voice. His English, cultivated in Sussex during the reign of Queen Victoria, was flawless.

The police woman looked up, her eyes opening a little wider. Andrew was used to his effect upon women, but it never ceased to please him. Deep at heart, he was vain and he knew it. Why else would he have grown his thick, dark brown hair down to the middle of his back?

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*Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* Act I, scene 5

"I was wondering if you could help me," he began. As his voice touched her ears, his mind gently put pressure against hers, delving softly within, insinuating his will. "I need to know where to find Detective Nick Knight."

She blinked several times, then turned to her keyboard, punched a few keys and looked at the monitor. "He's called in sick."

"Where does he live?" Andrew was smiling, even as his will closed about her.

"We're not supposed to give out that sort of infor...ma...." She sighed, allowing him to possess her with dark promises. "I'll write it down for you," she said after a moment, her eyes darting to the monitor, where Nick's address glowed in amber characters.

But the address was already in her mind and Andrew had read it the moment she scanned the screen.

"That won't be necessary. Thank you, Janet. You won't remember I was here."

"No." She frowned.

"You'll change the data on your screen now. Thank you."

"You're welcome." He turned and left, meeting no one as he exited through the glass doors. Nick's address was only a few blocks away.

How convenient.

Andrew found the building and parked the Jeep. He got to the front door just in time to see a woman enter carrying a large bag.

"May I help, miss?" He held open the door for her and attempted to take her bag. At first she resisted, then relented. When he paused just outside the threshold, she turned back.

"You are coming inside, aren't you?" she asked.

He nodded his head, silently thanking her for the invitation that allowed him entrance to the building, then found himself going up the steps behind her.

She came to a stop at an intricate front door and began to take her bag back.

"Are you visiting Nick?" Andrew asked, turning his most charming smile on her.

The woman did not immediately get flustered, as many might when faced with such a devastatingly handsome man. Instead she narrowed her eyes. "Do you know Nick?"

Andrew raised a brow. "You might say we're...blood relatives."

She scanned the length of him, taking in his pale skin. "Oh...I see. Well, something odd...I mean, Nick's not well. I don't think he wants company right now."

She did not seem inclined to open the door for him.

Andrew sighed. "I think this visit is to our mutual benefit," he told her, mentally reminding himself to wipe her memory of him before he left here this evening.

"Is this about that nut case Martin Planting?" There was a definite edge of irritation to her voice.

"I'm afraid so. You see, he's been quite a nuisance to me in the past." Andrew spread his now empty hands.

"All right." She reached up, pressed something in the elaborate plaster work of the door's frame, and the door clicked open.

Andrew followed her in to a spacious loft apartment. He sensed the presence of another human upstairs.

"Nick, you have company," Natalie called.

Sam sighed. He really wasn't up to company. He looked to Al and saw him punching something into his hand unit; a heartbeat later, Al was gone.

Al materialized his projection in the living area of Nick's apartment and immediately saw that Natalie had brought in a tall, slim man of about thirty with long brown hair.

The stranger turned, as if startled by Al's sudden appearance, his moss green eyes going wide. "Excuse me, but you surprised me. I'm Dr. Andrew Desais." He held out a hand toward Al, whose mouth dropped open in surprise.

For a moment Al stood, too dumbfounded to speak. "You can see me?" he asked finally.

At the same moment, Natalie turned and looked at Nick's visitor. He stood with a hand held out, talking to thin air. "Who are you talking to?" she asked, taking a step back.

Andrew looked confused. His gaze darted from Al to Natalie.

"She can't see me," Al told him quickly, wondering what was going on.

Making a remarkable recovery, Andrew swept his hand around toward Natalie. "We weren't properly introduced."

"Oh." She set down the deli bag. "I'm Nick's friend, Natalie." She shook hands with Andrew, and from his vantage point, Al could detect nothing awkward.

"You shouldn't be able to see me," he told Andrew. According to theory, only children and animals were aware of his presence. Why was this Andrew Desais different?

"Come on up," Sam called from upstairs.

"You go up, I'll get his soup ready." Natalie turned back to her bag.

"I'll go with you," Al told him.

"I don't understand," Andrew whispered under his breath. "What sort of creature are you?"

"I'm not allowed to say...exactly." Al shrugged.

"One might guess, from the fact that you carry a gadget, that you're not supernatural, but rather technical in nature," Andrew said calmly.

It was Al's turn to be surprised.

"What do you know about Nick Knight?" Andrew asked, pausing in the middle of the stairs.

"What do *you* know?" Al retorted.

"I know there's an obsessed character named Martin Planting out to discredit him and ruin his...er...life." Andrew continued up the stairs.

"That's right," Al confirmed. "He thinks Nick is a vampire."

"Is he?" Andrew asked.

"Is he what?"

"A vampire?"

Al scowled. "Vampires aren't real."

"Aren't they?" Smiling, Andrew continued up the stairs and into the bedroom.

"What do you know that we don't?" Al asked, coming to stand beside the bed. He saw that Sam was looking with curiosity at the visitor. "Oh...Nick, this is Dr. Andrew Desais."

"Nick?" Sam asked, trying not to look at Al.

"He can see and hear me," Al explained.

Andrew studied Sam, then reached to shake his hand. "You are definitely not a vampire. So what does that little twit Planting have on you?"

As Sam looked up at Andrew, his previous strange feeling about this leap increased dramatically. "Oh boy," he mumbled.

"What's the matter?" Al took a step closer, appearing to walk through the mattress.

"I think I know what brought you here tonight," Sam said to Andrew. "You're a vampire."

Andrew merely smiled. "Perhaps. Does it matter? We're both faced with a problem in the form of one Martin Planting."

Sam nodded.

"How would you like it if we made Planting look like a complete fool once and for all?" Andrew asked, one dark brow arching upward.

"Discredit him in public?" Sam asked.

"I'd love it." Andrew grinned. "That man has hounded me and my kind for years, destroying all I have built. Despite what you might think, I'm trying to help people. I really am a doctor. Martin can't see any of that;

he just wants to destroy me for past mistakes." Andrew's glance danced from Sam to Al. "Will you help me?"

"What did you have in mind?" Sam asked.

* * *

Martin Planting had gathered a small throng in front of the police station. Among those assembled were reporters from *The National Enquirer, The Globe, Toronto Tribune,* and *Daily Sun;* a camera crew from Channel Five had also shown up. A nervous Natalie stood in the crowd, wondering if Nick would really do what he had told her he would do.

Reading aloud from his prepared text, Martin announced to the people of Toronto that there were vampires in their midst and that Nick Knight, a detective on their own police force, was one of these monsters. He had facts: Nick had never been seen out in broad daylight—only wrapped in gloves, hat, coat, and dark glasses and never in the direct sunlight; he worked only the night shift; also, there were several unsolved mysteries regarding Nick's cases.

In the middle of these claims, Captain Stonetree, Nick's boss, came out of the police station and was bombarded with questions. Could he rebut Planting's charges?

Before Stonetree had much of a chance to say anything, there were shouts of astonishment as all faces turned toward the young man who was strolling toward the police station, eating a chili dog. Sunlight gleamed in his curling blond hair; he paused, putting a handkerchief to his face to stifle a sneeze, then continued forward, straight up to Captain Stonetree.

"Good afternoon, Captain. What's going on out here?" he asked, his blue gaze roaming to take in the stunned look on Martin Planting's face.

"Nothing. Nothing at all, Nick," Stonetree sighed. "You sound terrible."

"I've got a cold," Sam shrugged. "The funny thing is, I've got this craving for chili dogs. The doctor wanted me to come in for a physical, so despite the fact that I've got this problem with daylight, I thought now would be a good time."

"A very good time," Stonetree nodded, swung his arm toward the doors of the police station, and inclined his head. "After you, Detective."

Natalie dashed up the steps, linked her arm in Sam's, and felt as if she were dancing on air as they entered the police station.

"That was fine, Nick, just fine," Schankey called from his desk. He was surrounded by other officers. "I caught it all on the tube." He pointed to the portable television he had on his desk. "I can't believe you're eating junk food."

"Neither can I."

Sam smiled to himself. For whatever reasons, he now knew why he had made this particular leap: if Nick Knight really was a vampire, the Powers That Be didn't want the rest of Toronto to know it.

He meekly submitted to a physical, was almost grateful for the shot of penicillin the doctor gave him, and smiled to himself as Natalie drove him home afterward.

"Now, you're to do as he says," she told Sam. "Stay in bed for the rest of this week. Drink plenty of liquids. Take your medicine."

"Yes, ma'am." Sam grinned.

"I still don't know how you pulled this one off, Nick, but however you managed it, it was wonderful." She cast him a quick smile.

"Sometimes I even amaze myself," Sam told her with a chuckle. His throat was still sore, his head feeling slightly lighter than air, but he was pretty sure this leap was about to end.

He was wrong.

He spent the next five days in bed being waited on by Natalie, who turned out to be a very intelligent and kind lady. It was only when he began to feel better, just around midnight of the sixth day, that he could feel the energy begin to tumble through him again, shooting along every nerve, sending him forward to his next leap.

* * *

Sam found himself standing in a hospital emergency room. He recognized the setting immediately, having spent so much time in similar surroundings as an intern. He wore blue scrubs, and a stethoscope dangled from his neck. Before him, a woman was staring at him with a look of what he could only describe as intoxicated.

"Well, Mrs. Sounders," a nurse spoke to his right, addressing the lady sitting on the examination table. "You heard Dr. Desais. You're perfectly fine."

Sam's head swung toward the nurse and he caught sight of his reflection in the chrome paper towel dispenser behind her. It couldn't be!

"Ex...excuse me." He staggered out of the room and found himself in a gleaming hallway. Across from him was a sign reading "MEN." He pushed through the door and went straight for the mirror. There, looking back at him, brown hair neatly pulled back into a queue, was the face of Andrew Desais.

"Oh boy," Sam mumbled, wondering how Al was handling the latest guest in the waiting room.

How To Write Your Own Quantum Leap Story

by Linda Mooney

A. Choose the year:
   1. Sometime in the 1950s
   2. Sometime in the 1960s
   3. Sometime in the 1980s (Sam hates the 70s)
   4. Sometime in the 1990s
   5. Sometime between 300 B.C. and the year 2525

   and try to think up a plausible reason why.

B. Choose the sex of the person he leaps into:
   1. Male
   2. Female
   3. Other

C. Choose whom he leaps into:
   1. New York, 1954—Sam becomes a redheaded housewife with a penchant for getting into trouble and a husband who's the leader of a nightclub band.
   2. Omaha, 1976—He's a homeless individual who, every time he gets angry or upset, rips out of his clothes, balloons to 275 pounds, and turns a bright green.
   3. Washington, D.C., 1966—As a well-meaning but inept secret agent, Sam finds himself working along with a cute partner, a guy hiding in a toilet, and a shoe that keeps ringing at the most inopportune times.
   4. New York, 1990—He leaps into a giant man/beast with a harelip living beneath the sewers of the city.
   5. Hawaii, 1984—This time he's a private detective living in a mansion with a manservant and a bright red Ferrari at his beck and call—all of which does not belong to him.

D. Choose a Main Plotline:

1. Sam discovers he's to be one of the final 7 astronauts on the space shuttle Challenger.
2. Sam must teach the theory of time travel to a Dr. Emmett Brown.
3. Sam gets an invitation from an old college chum to spend a "fun weekend" at a revolutionary new amusement park on a small island off the coast of Costa Rica.
4. Sam leaps into the body of a big-city newspaper reporter—but what are those funny-looking blue tights doing in his locker?

E. Choose Al's Subplot Concern:

1. His last 4 ex-wives are trying to get him declared legally dead so they can all divide the inheritance.
2. His tailor is going out of business.
3. Project Quantum Leap has been designated a Non-Smoking establishment.
4. He found out that Trojans do not come in "Heavy Duty XXL".

F. And finally, choose the episode's Kiss with History:

1. Sam finds himself doing research for a forthcoming book—The Joy of Sex.
2. Sam votes for Richard Nixon for President.
3. Sam has to decide between New Coke, Coke Classic, and Pepsi.
4. Having always admired David Niven, Sam is delighted to discover himself onstage with the actor—until he realizes that he is STREAKING at the Academy Awards.

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